



SINNERMAN

MARY CALMES

Sinnerman | *Mary Calmes*

I

I WAS alone, and that was death for a warder. Fortunately I was not fighting demons at the moment but was instead drinking, which could be dicey in a few hours considering the mood I was in. But even as drunk as I was, I recognized my friend Ryan's boyfriend sitting with some guys on the other side of the bar. I wondered if he was out to pick somebody up, hanging with his friends until he spotted the one-night stand he would leave with. He was probably cheating on Ryan the way my hearth, Frank Sullivan, had been cheating on me. And my buddy would never know until it was too late, until he caught them. Yes, Julian Nash was out cruising—why wouldn't he be? What was his boyfriend's heart worth when leveraged against a hot body in his bed?

Sitting there, nursing either my fifth or seventh—I had lost count hours ago—scotch and water, I watched Julian laughing. All the guys with him were about his age, the camaraderie obvious, probably coworkers having drinks after work. I realized after a minute that I wasn't the only one watching the five men. I was used to scanning a room, in the habit of looking for threats, so I saw the man at the bar, three stools down from me, staring. I thought it would take me some time to see where his interest lay, but when Julian rose to get another round, the man studied his progression from the table to the bar with absolute unshakeable intensity. And I understood. Julian Nash was a treat to look at. A lot of men in the bar would have had him in their sights. Once they talked to him, the desire would be even greater to have him. He was funny and smart and, most of all, kind. I liked him immediately when I first met him. I really hoped he was just having drinks with friends and not looking to get laid. Even one more disappointment would be too much.

"What can I get you?"

I looked back down the bar and realized that the tall man I had noticed before had, as I suspected he would, leaned close to Julian and propositioned him. The hearth of my fellow warder smiled wide. My stomach flipped over with dread.

"I've got mine, thanks."

"Well, then have a seat, and the next one's on me."

"Actually I'm having drinks with friends"—Julian smiled warmly—"but I'm very flattered."

He was out with his friends and was not on the prowl. It was stupid how happy the little piece of news made me, but I was, as ridiculous as it sounded, still a romantic at heart.

"Have dinner with me."

"I'm having dinner with my boyfriend after this, so no, thank you."

The man suddenly seemed unsteady in his chair.

"Are you okay?" Julian sounded concerned as he picked up a martini with an onion in it and a highball glass that was halfway filled.

"I'm fine," the man told him, shaking his head like it needed clearing. "I'd just really like to have dinner with you."

"And I told you no," Julian repeated, turning.

The guy rose fast from the barstool and moved around in front of him. This would be the true test, because standing there, gifting Julian with a wicked smile that lit his emerald eyes, the man was tall, dark, and very handsome.

"Are you sure?"

"I am, but again, I'm very flattered," Julian said softly, stepping around him, starting back for the table.

I snickered, and the man turned at the same time and caught me. It was not one of my better moments and one I could have normally covered, but my reflexes were shot for now.

"Something funny?"

I coughed to clear my throat but couldn't help smiling.

"Nope."

He squinted at me before he came toward me.

"Sorry," I apologized up front. Handsome really didn't do the man justice. "But"—I chuckled—"you never had a chance, man."

"No? Why's that?" he asked, his eyes sweeping over me, darkening, the hunger infusing them. I was not Julian Nash, but apparently I would do.

"His boyfriend is really hot."

He looked like I'd slapped him.

Nobody killed heat as quickly as I could. It was a gift, really, my sort of blunt blurting of the truth that no one ever wanted to hear. The very handsome man was appalled, and then he recovered.

"Is that right?" he snapped at me, the voice that had been interested seconds before now icy cold.

"You watch Ryan's Rundown on Channel 5?" I asked him, trying not to slur my words.

"Sure. Everyone watches Ryan Dean," he said irritably.

And they did. The ex-model-turned-television-host was too charming and too hot to not have a religious following.

He was also a very scary sword-carrying demon hunter. "He sleeps with Ryan Dean every night," I said, pointing after Julian. "You think you got a chance?"

His scowl was dark.

"Oh, what the fuck?" came the growl from behind the Adonis.

The look of utter disdain that washed over the man's face was very amusing. Watching him turn slowly to the voice, I nearly lost it.

"Malic," he said, his voice dripping with contempt.

"Graham," my friend said, the irritation right there for anyone to hear as he took a seat beside me.

They didn't even look each other in the eye, but the loathing, even without it, was overwhelmingly obvious.

Graham made a noise in the back of his throat like just being in the same room with Malic made him sick. Malic's patronizing scoff was just as telling.

Graham turned on his heel and left. He threw a fifty on the bar as he walked by it but didn't stop even when the bartender called a thank-you after him.

"God, that guy hates you," Marcus Roth, another of my friends and a fellow warder, said as he took a seat on the barstool on my left.

"Like I give a shit."

Marcus's knee bumped mine, and I felt his hand on my thigh, patting me, just for a second. He was worried. They all were. "You need to work on your people skills."

"I didn't hit him. That's as good as it gets," Malic told him, a dark scowl on his face.

"But why do you let that asshole get to you every time?"

"I dunno. He just rubs me the wrong way."

"How long've you known the guy?" I chimed in with my innocuous question.

"Long enough. He's a dick," he told me, squinting at me.

"And Leith was right—you look like hammered shit."

"Thank you very much."

"Hey."

I turned to Marcus, and I was instantly sorry I had. His dark eyes never missed anything, and at the moment he was concentrating his considerable powers of observation on me.

"Me and Malic are headed over to my place to eat and then go patrol. Come have dinner with us."

There was something wrong with that sentence.

"Jacks?"

I ran it back in my head, processing his words, trying for the life of me to figure out what was wrong with what he was saying.

There was something.

Come eat. Come eat.... Wait. "I thought Joey hated Malic. How're you taking him home?" I asked, realizing how long that had taken me. My brain normally worked a lot faster. I was really trashed.

He shrugged. "Apparently I missed the obvious. Joe didn't like Malic because all this time, he thought that Malic wanted me."

I squinted at him.

"Just don't say it."

"Huh. So for, what—five years now, almost six, your hearth, the guy you love more than anything, thought your best friend wanted to get down with you."

He nodded.

"What changed?"

"Dylan." Marcus sighed. "Malic found his hearth; Joe spent one night listening to the lovebirds together and confessed everything."

I did the slow pan to Malic.

He rolled his eyes before flipping me off.

"When did I say that that's what it probably was?"

"I think it was five years ago," Marcus offered from my left.

"And when did I say that you should just tell Joey that you love Marcus like the brother you never had but that's all?"

"Same time," Marcus chimed in.

"Uh, fuck you both," Malic told us, lifting his hand to get the attention of the bartender.

I leaned my head forward, raking my hands through my thick curly hair that now fell to my shoulders. It needed to be cut. I also needed to shave. I had gotten lazy about the stubble on my face and now, after a month, maybe two, had a beard and mustache to show for it. Like it mattered. "You guys don't need to babysit me. I'm not gonna kill myself."

"Come eat." Marcus repeated his offer, hand on the back of my neck, massaging gently.

"No." I smiled. "I'll let Joe bond with Malic. They lost a lot of time."

"They bonded," he assured me, "and Dylan's the one my boyfriend's in love with now. Compared to him, Malic and me are both chopped liver."

And I understood that. Dylan Shaw, Malic's newly discovered hearth, was as close to candy as any man could be. At nineteen he was devastating; by thirty he'd have the world at his feet. What I liked best about him though

was not his ethereal beauty but his loyalty. It was a trait I had come recently to admire.

I was a warder, and I hunted demons. Every city had a sentinel, and every sentinel had five warders, a clutch, that he commanded. Warders, because we basically lived in a cesspool of filth and evil, had to be able to come home at the end of each day to a sanctuary. The hearth of a warder, their mate, provided that. For two years the man I came home to was Frank Sullivan. He was it, my whole life, the guy who made my loft off 18th Street in Potrero Hill the place I wanted to be more than anything. And then three months ago I had tracked a demon, was racing across rooftops after him, and had come to a dead stop before I could vault to the next building.

"Aren't we running?" he had asked sarcastically, doubling back down off the ledge when he had realized I was no longer in hot pursuit.

I couldn't move at all. I was frozen where I stood.

"Warder?"

He was not a demon, specifically, but a creature I wanted to kill nonetheless. A being I had to slay in order to keep Malic safe.

"I...."

"What has you so mesmerized?"

My mouth opened, but no words came out.

"Speak."

But I couldn't. I could only stare.

I felt hot, wet breath on the back of my neck, heard him inhale deeply as I pointed with the tip of the ornate rapier in my left hand.

Across the chasm between the buildings, on a marbled, opulent-looking penthouse patio, stood my hearth, accountant Frank Sullivan, and his top client, Rene Favreau.

The night had started out being about saving Malic, but now I was going to have to kill him for ever introducing Frank to his buddy.

"What am I looking at, warder?"

I couldn't even push air through my lungs as I watched the two men kiss. And it wasn't the tentative first kind but the one where you knew what you were doing because you had done it so many times before. Rene's mouth slanted down over Frank's, and he took possession, one hand fisted in his hair, the other cupping his ass.

"Oh, he's enjoying that."

The words tore me open. I whirled, swinging the rapier, ready to take the kyrie's head.

"Touchy," he said, leaping back and sideways, easily evading my hasty attack.

"Your kind killed my family!" I roared at him.

"No," he clarified, his voice calm, deep, and husky.

"Yes!" I snarled out my murderous rage. It was the only thing left in me as I thrust forward.

He maneuvered around me. "The day you pulled me off Malic, you screamed that obscene accusation at me, that a blood demon killed your family."

I advanced on him.

"And I grieve your loss, warder, but it has nothing to do with me."

"Kyries and blood demons are the same thing," I assured him, my tone icy as I swiped at him with roundhouse swings.

"Nope, wrong." He smiled wickedly, his extended canines glinting in the moonlight. "Kyries are born in purgatory, all demons in hell. Demons have

no finesse; kyries know the difference."

I growled at him.

"And we're the savages?"

I lunged at him, the rapier swinging wildly, splitting the air with a whoosh of sound, fast as a whip. But he was an excellent swordsman and deflected me effortlessly with his Chinese *jian*, parrying, thrusting, and driving me back. I looked for a weakness, for a misstep, but his stance was solid, and I found no opening.

"Warder!"

His voice brought me from my murderous rage; my eyes flicked to his face.

"Again I say, I am sorry for your family, warder, but a kyrie is not a blood demon, and my kind had nothing to do with their deaths."

I rolled forward, ready to take his head off.

"I want you to acknowledge the truth, warder."

There were no words as I charged at him, but he moved fast, too fast, and my momentum carried me forward toward the edge of the twenty-four-story building. Before I could recover my balance, he had me.

I was shoved down to my knees, a hand fisted in my hair so that my head was yanked back hard, my throat bared even as he focused my gaze back across the yawning space to the patio.

They were inside, the sliding glass door closed now, the drapes drawn. But the light was on and made everything transparent. Rene Favreau, whom I had always liked, would not have thought to pull the blinds. They were up too high, and the building Raphael, the kyrie, and I were on housed offices. He would not have imagined that anyone was looking. But I was. I was looking, and when Frank, my partner, my love, stepped naked from the bathroom and was thrown down onto the bed laughing, I thought my heart

would stop beating at that very moment. He invited Rene just as he had me, on hands and knees in the center of the bed.

"Is he wagging his tail, warder? What do you call that?"

I struggled, hands on the thickly muscled forearm of the kyrie.

"Is he your hearth, warder?"

I would not cry in front of a monster, in front of a creature meant for killing.

"Is he?"

Something broke inside my chest; I felt a cog come loose as I dragged in air.

"Warder," he said, his voice thick, "when you pulled me from Malic as he lay in my arms and I drank his blood, I turned and sank teeth into you. Do you recall?"

I didn't, and as I watched the shadowy figures blend, combine, become one, I could not be made to care.

"I had thought to come back in the night and steal Malic away, drag him to the pit with me, have him see hell, chaos, the rings, and all the planes. I crave a mate same as you, warder, need one perhaps even more desperately. I've heard that warders go mad, eventually curl up and die without a hearth, but kyries... we vent that madness. We share it. If we are unloved, we turn solely to hunting and find solace only in killing."

I heaved out a breath.

"And one day, we become that which we hunt."

The shadows parted, one rose, and the other extended arms as the room went dark. I wanted to howl in pain, but there was no air.

"But Malic's blood was not sweet; it gave me no sustenance, and taking it was not a joy. Had you not come when you did, I would have fulfilled my

promise to him and taken little. But in your fervor, warder, in your panic to free your friend, your shoulder moved beneath my fangs."

I nodded because suddenly I did remember. I had found him drinking from Malic, and all I could do, all that mattered, was saving my friend from the fate that had taken my family from me. I had leaped forward but had missed Leith moving at the same time. When he tore the kyrie from Malic, I found myself between the two men. Malic's blood was pumping from the wound that I would admit that Leith created when he separated them, and I had enough time to roll sideways and take the impact of the kyrie's bite deep into my right shoulder.

"Your blood"—his voice rumbled deep in his chest—

"unlike Malic's, is the sweetest I have ever tasted."

I had felt the kyrie's hands turn to claws as he clutched me tight. Arms and legs were wrapped around me as his mouth found my neck. I had been frantic to get away. I fought for my life, and even after we were separated, Ryan had me pinned to the bed so I wouldn't go after him. Marcus was holding Malic together, pressing his bloody shirt to the man's throat. Leith was calling for Jael. The room had spun, the images blurred as I separated my past from my present, not sure if the screaming was me or Marcus.

I hadn't told anyone what had happened; no one had seen the bite, too focused on Malic. They saw me struggling with the kyrie, but no one knew the blood was mine. I didn't want to worry Jael, my sentinel. He had been concerned that the kyrie would come back looking for Malic. I didn't want to add in the anxiety for me as well.

"It is you I hunger for now, warder."

Everything blurred as my eyes filled with hot tears.

My head was tipped sideways. A wet tongue slithered from shoulder to ear, tasting, licking, lips pressed to my skin before teeth. Even the bite did not move me, infuse me with the will to fight. The tug of skin, the first swallow—even then, I was frozen from what I had just witnessed.

My family had been taken from me by a blood demon, by a pack of them. The warder of the city I lived in at the time, I had grown up in, Knoxville, Tennessee, had found them and killed them. I was twelve when I went to live in San Francisco with my Aunt Gail. At sixteen I met Jael. One of his warders was sent to Paris, and he needed a replacement.

I felt the call, his call, the stirring inside the moment I saw the man. He was like a surrogate father to me; I didn't want him worried that a kyrie wanted to drink my blood. I kept it to myself and hunted Raphael down alone. I would have killed him, but then I saw Frank.

"Is your heart so broken that you would gift me with all your blood?"

I would have *tried* to kill him at least. Kyries were preternatural bounty hunters; they were not the easiest things to dispatch.

"Tell me your blood is mine to take, warder."

His question brought me from my thoughts.

"You think you found me, but the truth is... I let you."

Let me?

"Of the two of us, I'm the true hunter. You protect; I hunt."

I couldn't think. His tongue slid over my punctured flesh, soothed it, and eased away the sting, the heartbeat of raw, pulsing pain.

"I wanted you to find me," he said softly. "I hoped."

Hoped?

"You taste like heat and life, warder." He breathed the words in my ear. "I will devour you, and you will be mine."

I've never ached like I do now. Only speak the words, and I will take you from this place, from this pain. Only speak the words."

"What words are those?"

"Take me. Tell me to take you, and I will."

I shivered hard because it was tempting. Death and oblivion sounded okay.
"You want me to let you kill me?"

"No, warder," he breathed over my skin, his nose slipping down the side of my neck. "You mistake my desire for you as a desire for your death. I don't want to kill you; I simply want you to be mine."

The darkness in him was the only thing I understood at that moment, but I wasn't ready to tumble into the abyss.

Not yet. "Go away. Please," I begged him, screwing my eyes up tight.

When I opened them moments later, I was alone on the roof in the howling wind. I sat there even when the sky opened and poured down icy rain. I couldn't move. I was rooted there to the spot where everything I knew had come to an end.

"Jacks." Marcus bumped my shoulder and brought me from the past back to the present.

I turned to look at him.

"Have you even talked to Frank at all?"

"I have," I told him, coughing.

"And?"

What was I going to tell him? That Frank had said I was selfish and I had agreed that I was? That Frank didn't want to be the custodian of our relationship anymore? That the man I loved wanted and needed more than I could give him?

"He wants to be happy." I shrugged. "Who can blame him?"

"What does that even mean?"

"It means that he should be able to count on me listening to him, not just the other way around. He said that all I ever did was take, that I never gave anything back."

"I don't follow," Malic told me.

"He wants more."

"More what?"

"Caring. I was dragging all my shit home to him day after day and never letting him vent, never listening for what he needed."

"And so fucking around on you, that was the way to clue you in?"

"He said he tried talking to me and I just never heard him."

"That's bullshit," Marcus growled. "When Joe wants my attention, he makes sure he gets it. And think about that for a minute. Joey is quiet and composed... but if he's unhappy, don't we all know it?"

There was no argument. "He hit me with a book the last time because he thought—just thought, mind you—that I wasn't listening to him."

Marcus smiled at me. "I always tell him I'm thinking so he doesn't poke me. But the man's blind, so he can't see you and check."

"Blind my ass," I grumbled. Technically Marcus's heart couldn't see, but he was one of the most perceptive men I knew. Just by things I didn't say, he could assess my mood.

"Yeah." Marcus sighed.

Five, almost six years, and he still got the dopey look on his face whenever he thought about the man he loved. Not that Joseph Locke wasn't in the same boat; theirs was a love I actually still believed in, as I saw it all over both their faces whenever I saw the two men together. And the banter that

went back and forth was a treat to hear. I liked walking places with them. I liked to watch them hold hands, see Joe reach for Marcus not tentatively but knowing full well that his partner would be there. I missed it, the faith and the certainty. It was a blessing to walk through the day knowing that you belonged to someone else. To be let go was something I had never hoped to be.

"I should go home," I told my friends.

"Come with us."

"I'm shitty company," I assured them, "and I'm drunk. I need to go home."

"Hey."

The three of us turned to find Julian Nash leaning on the bar, gifting us with a smile that translated warmth and interest at the same time. The man looked like home, and I wanted one of my own.

"Julian," Marcus greeted him. "How are you?"

"Good," he said as he put a hand on Malic's back.

Most people were not brave enough to touch the man without being asked. He was scary, plain and simple, and just from looking at him, I could tell that Julian was not intimidated in any way.

"What're you guys up to?"

"Just checkin' on drunk as shit here." Malic tipped his head to me, not saying a word about Julian crowding him or touching him.

"Jackson."

My eyes flicked to Julian.

"Me and my buddy Cash are meeting Ry and Cash's wife, Phoebe, here, and then we're all goin' out to dinner.

"Why don't you come?"

"I—"

"Why don't you all come?"

"No thanks." Marcus smiled at him, unable not to. "Me and Malic are expected at my place, but I think Jacks going is a great idea."

I shook my head.

"Why not?" Julian pressed me.

"Because Ryan won't like it," I said flatly. He'd much rather spend time with you and your friends than with any of us. He hates us."

"Speak for yourself," Marcus told me.

"Oh c'mon," I groused at him. "I don't know a man that hates being a warder more than Ry, and because of that, he hates all of us too. You know it and I know it. There's no way he wants any of us around."

Dead silence.

Shit.

I leaned over and buried my face in my arms on top of the bar. I was hoping they'd all just go away.

"Actually," Julian said, his voice low, sensual, as his fingers dug into my shoulders. "You guys are the only family he has, and he kind of likes you."

I was going to argue, but he was kneading my tight muscles with his strong hands, and dear God in heaven, it felt good. I was used to having someone touch me. I had two years of hand-holding and hugging and leaning and quick pecks and wet kisses with tongue to get over. I was used to being loved physically and emotionally, and to go from getting a full-body hug at least once a day to nothing was heartbreaking. No one had touched me since Frank left.

"Ry would love if you had dinner with us."

I was going to start bawling like a baby if I did not get the hell out of there.

"Maybe another time," I said, fast, jerking up, almost knocking over Julian and the barstool as I stood. I shoved my hands down into my pockets. "I gave the bartender my credit card to run a tab," I told Malic. "Close it out for me, okay? And give him a big-ass tip. I'll see ya, guys."

I bolted around Julian, waved to his friend, Cash, who I recognized sitting at the table, grabbed my peacoat off the coat rack at the end of the bar, and was outside seconds later. Unfortunately I plowed right into Ryan Dean.

"What're you doing?" he snapped at me.

"Nothing, sorry," I growled at him. "See ya."

But he held on, and even though he was shorter than me by a couple of inches, leaner, less muscular, he was just as strong. So when I went to go, he swung me around to face him.

I stared at him, into his hazel eyes, and watched his brows slowly furrow.

"Don't get your panties in a bunch. I'm fine."

"You're not fine," he snapped at me, dragging me a few feet away, still under the awning of the bar so we were not standing in the rain. "You're drunk off your ass."

"I can't have dinner," I almost whined, my voice cracking. "Ry, I can't see Marcus and Joe or you and Julian.

I just.... It's stupid but—"

"You need to shave this," he told me, changing the subject just like I needed him to. I could have kissed him, I was so grateful. He put his hands on my face. "All this—this isn't you."

I nodded, and his hand slid around the back of my neck as he leaned my head down into his shoulder.

"For fuck's sake, Ry, don't be nice to me."

"No, you're right," he said, shoving me away from him.

"That would never do."

I tried to smile at him, but he was great and didn't stand there and make me. He just pulled the very confused-looking woman with the jade-colored eyes after him into the bar. I flipped up the collar on my peacoat and ran down the street to the next awning and the next until I crossed one street and then another. I saw a pub I liked and headed for it. Halfway there I saw Simon Kim, my friend Leith's hearth, get out of a cab and hurry inside. I would have gone somewhere else, but I was out of options this far downtown.

Why was I suddenly awash in hearths?

When I looked back up from the ground toward the front door, I saw another man, and the hair on the back of my neck stood up. Slipping into the doorway of a closed real estate office, I got my phone out and called Marcus.

"Hey, Jacks, did you change your—"

"Didn't you get a restraining order on that guy Eric Donovan so that he had to stay like a hundred feet away from Simon at all times?"

"What?"

"Simon. Leith's Simon. How many fuckin' Simons do you know?" I asked irritably.

"No, I—oh, you're somewhere else and—oh. Oh. Yeah."

He had worked it out. "So if I just saw Simon go in a bar, and that guy Eric followed him, then—"

"Then tell me where you are, and me and Malic will be right there."

I told him where I was, flipped my BlackBerry closed, and crossed the street to the pub.

It was noisy inside. The game was on—Monday Night Football—and it was hard to get through the crowd. Even though I was not small at six-two, two hundred pounds, it was still slow going. Being a warder, I could have plowed through them if I needed to, but there was no emergency. I saw Simon sitting at a small round table toward the back, the pitcher of beer on the table letting me know that he, like Julian, was meeting friends, and I spotted the guy I had tailed at the end of the bar. There was an empty barstool beside him, and I took it.

I lifted my hand to catch the bartender's eye, and he was there immediately, asking what I was having. I ordered a cognac and then leaned sideways and asked Eric Donovan what he was having.

"What?" He was startled when I bumped him and even more alarmed to have not only my attention but the bartender's as well.

"What're you drinking?" The bartender fired the question at him.

"I—I don't—"

"Can't sit at the bar if you're not drinkin'," I told him.

"That's right," the bartender agreed, smirking at me before turning back to Eric. "So what's it gonna be?"

"Uhm, wine, I guess."

"White wine spritzer?" I teased him.

The bartender snorted out a laugh. "Coming right up."

"No, wait. I—"

"Shut the fuck up," I ordered him under my breath.

His head twisted to me. "What did you just—"

"You're so fuckin' lucky it's me that saw you trailing Simon in here and not Leith," I said, leaning into him.

All the color drained from his face at once. His eyes got huge and round, and his mouth opened, but nothing came out.

"You're not supposed to be here, Mr. Donovan."

"No," he agreed.

I nodded, tipped my head sideways, and studied his face. "Do you want to hurt him?"

"No, I—"

"You just need him to listen to you."

"Yes," he exclaimed.

"Do you have a firearm on you, Mr. Donovan?"

The look I was getting was absolutely broken. I recognized it. I wore it a lot myself.

"Do you want to gimme the gun before Mr. Kim's lawyer, the one I just called, shows up and has you carted off to jail?"

He swallowed hard and nodded.

"Is it in your suit pocket or the pocket of your trench coat?"

"Suit."

"Okay," I soothed him. "Lean into me and drop it into my coat pocket."

"But—"

"This is the last time you're ever gonna see it. Wrap your brain around that."

"It's my father's, not mine."

"Then be prepared to explain things to him."

"I—"

"You're violating your restraining order, Mr. Donovan." I let my voice go cold. "Not to mention that even though Leith Haas is one of the sweetest guys you ever wanna meet, where Simon Kim is concerned, he can be kind of territorial.

I heard he can turn into a real caveman."

His eyes, when they flicked to mine, were scared, and he didn't even know the half of it.

Four months ago Leith and Simon had taken an unexpected trip into a hell dimension. By all accounts the siphon world had changed the normally sensitive and articulate warder into a barbarian. The only way Simon had been able to communicate with him at all was because in any form he took, Simon was still the heart of a warder, his hearth. Even though they had only been dating for half a year, I saw their bond becoming stronger with each passing day.

"Mr. Donovan?"

He leaned into me, slid the gun into the large pocket on the outside of my peacoat, and stood up, staring down at me.

"My father will want his gun back."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Mr. Donovan," I said evenly, my gaze fastened on his, holding him there.

"Who are you?"

"I'm your guardian angel, obviously."

He took a shaky breath. "I don't know what to do."

"You need to understand that this is your last chance, Mr. Donovan." I sighed, turning to tip my head at the bartender as he deposited my Courvoisier and Eric's lightweight drink on the bar in front of us.

"I would never actually hurt—"

"I'm not a good man," I confessed solemnly, my eyes flicking back to his from my cognac. "Isn't this pretty?"

He nodded.

"I'm gonna drink mine and you drink yours, and we'll go out the back, and no one will know you were here."

He took the glass, and I watched him wrestle with his choice. Stay or go, fight or run, what to do, what to do....

I drained my glass, pulled out my wallet, and lifted my hand for the bartender. He was there fast, and I gave him a twenty and a ten. "Thanks." I smiled at him.

"Stick around," he told me.

I smiled my appreciation for the flirting, rose, and took Eric Donovan's arm. I saw Marcus and Malic outside and tightened my hand on his bicep. I suddenly wished I hadn't called them because I had no interest in seeing them for the second time that night.

I dragged Eric after me down the short hall, past the bathrooms, and out the back. In the thick air outside, I swung him around hard and slammed him up against the wall.

He clutched at the brick at his back.

I reached into the breast pocket of my peacoat and withdrew my business card. "I am in private security, Mr.

Donovan. If your father wants to know where his gun is, he can call me. This is your last warning. If you go near Simon Kim ever again, I will be forced to put you somewhere you won't like."

He stared into my eyes.

"I know you met Leith's friend Malic Sunden, didn't you?"

There was a quick nod.

"And I know you met Leith's lawyer, Marcus Roth."

Yes, he had, and he let me know with another nod.

"I'm different from them." I exhaled, swallowing hard, feeling the anger well up in me. "Marcus is inherently good.

So is Malic." I squinted at him. "I used to be good too, but I'm not anymore. I will hurt you, so if nothing else will deter you, if nothing else will scare you, let it be this."

He sucked in his breath when I put the switchblade to his throat a second later.

"I don't care what happens to me." I shivered, feeling how cold I was inside. "Don't make me hurt you, okay?"

Please."

My voice, my eyes, and the blade, all of it together were too much. I smelled the urine even before I saw it puddling beside his right leg. He was wearing a navy suit. He could walk away, and no one would know.

It took me a second to realize that I had him pinned against the brick wall. I stepped back, careful where I stepped, and he levered off the wall and ran. My phone rang a second later.

"Hey." I coughed, clearing my throat.

"Where the hell are you?" Marcus asked me. "I'm here, Malic's here, and Leith just got here to meet Simon. Where the hell are you?"

"Sorry," I told him, starting around the side of the building back toward the sidewalk. "I don't know why I called you; I was out of it. I took care of it already."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he had a gun on him and I need to get rid of it."

"Oh for crissakes, Jacks, we need to call the—"

"It's done, Marcus. I had no idea I was scarier than Malic, though."

"You have been lately."

I grunted. "I'll see ya later."

"No, wait. Where—"

"Gun. I need to ditch the gun, Marcus."

"Fine."

"I'll talk to you later. Who's patrolling tonight?"

"Leith and Ry."

"Okay," I said and hung up. As I slipped from the side of the building to the sidewalk, I wondered what I was going to do with the gun. If I went over to Rene Favreau's house and shot him and then Frank, everyone would blame Eric Donovan. Or his father. The idea had merit.

II

THE night I had found out that my hearth, the man I loved more than my own life, was sleeping with one of Malic's friends, I had gone home and sat up, waiting. When he came home at three in the morning, he had been startled to find me sitting in the dark in the living room. He flipped on the light, and I squinted, his appearance, not the light, hurting my eyes.

He had gasped. "Jesus Christ, Jackson, you scared the hell out of me."

"Sorry."

"What are you doing here?" He cleared his throat.

"Where else would I be but at home?" I asked, staring at his flushed face, swollen lips, tousled hair, and wrinkled clothes.

"Why are you sitting in the dark?"

What to say.

"I thought you were patrolling tonight."

"I was," I told him. "Downtown, close to Union Square."

He turned from hanging up his topcoat and suit jacket to look at me.

I stared back.

"Okay," he said, laying his gloves and scarf on the back of the couch, lining them up.

"So what are you going to do?"

"Meaning?"

"Meaning"—his voice was so controlled, so steady—"are you going to move out, or should I?"

My life imploded.

I yelled, I screamed, I tore the apartment apart until Frank threatened to walk out if I didn't calm down. When I did, making myself stand by the window and not move, he talked.

He loved me, but he couldn't live with me. I was a selfish bastard and I only cared about him for what he could give to me. I gave nothing in return. I was possessive and jealous and smothering, and how I could live every day in a black-and-white world without any gray, without any room for liking things, not simply loving them or hating them, was too much for him to handle anymore.

He could not be somebody else's everything; he needed a break. I loved too hard; I did everything too damn hard. I needed to throttle back on the passion; I was going to burn out on life if I wasn't careful.

It was exhausting being in a relationship with me where he had to give so much, was expected to be there for me, on for me, all the time. He wanted a friend; he wanted a lover who would cuddle and be gentle, not constantly maul him, manhandle him. Why did he have to be held down or fucked up against the wall in the kitchen? Why couldn't there be dinner and wine and snuggling on the couch? Why was all my communication done through sex? Why couldn't I use my goddamn words once in a while?

He said he needed normal. He told me he was tired of demons and fighting and seeing me come home covered in dirt and bruises. Watching blood run down the drain in the shower was not his idea of fun. It had been thrilling at first, had been a rush to be the man who created a sanctuary for a champion, but now, after two years, now it was too much to ask. He wanted a dog and a house and a yard and kids. He wanted his life to start, and Rene Favreau, with his kind heart and brilliant career, was just the man to give it to him.

I threatened to kill his new lover, and he was terrified enough to call Malic and tell him to protect his friend. And while I was warned to not go near

Rene, my fellow warder severed all ties with his friend. I told him later, weeks later, when I could breathe, when I could think, when I could speak again, that he didn't need to lose Rene because of me, but Malic, being Malic, said that no friend of his would ever fuck the mate of another. The hearth of a warder was a sacred thing, and even though Rene did not know the magnitude of his trespass, he would still not be forgiven. He had still screwed someone who he knew belonged to another.

Malic had no respect for a man like that.

"Malic should forgive Rene," I had told Ryan when we were patrolling together.

Ryan had turned and looked at me hard. "If it was me, and Julian had slept with Rene, I can't say what I would have done. Your constraint is admirable."

I was stunned because I thought the way I was calling Frank and emailing him and stopping by his office verged on psychosis. "I've been stalking him."

"But you haven't killed him or Rene," he said flatly.

"Like I said, it's admirable."

I took a shaky breath. "You would never do that, you have too much pride. If Julian ever cheated on you I know that—"

"I don't know what I would do and I prefer not to guess.

Let Malic do what he wants."

I never said another word about it.

One night I was standing out in the rain on Rene's balcony, not even realizing that I was soaked to the skin, my shoes filled with water, when Frank came out to see me in galoshes, under an umbrella.

"You're lucky he's not here," he told me.

"He can't hurt me," I told him through chattering teeth.

"I'm a goddamn warder. I'll throw him off his own fuckin' balcony."

Frank nodded. "But what are you doing out here? How did you get here without me letting you in? That would be the question."

"Like I give a shit."

"I'm going to call Jael," he told me. "You're jeopardizing the rest of the warders with this behavior. You get that, right?"

I was shivering really hard.

"I'm sorry, Jackson," he told me. "I really am, but I don't love you anymore. I haven't in a really long time and I'm sorry I lied when I said I did. I was just too tired to make a change. Even though it was draining, even though it was like having a second job, I just—I was addicted to the rush of you needing me. I thought if I left you, you would fall apart, and then you'd make a mistake and maybe die. It just...." He exhaled sharply. "It was so stupid."

"No, it's not. I have fallen apart. You are my whole—"

"I'm not! My ego would not let me think that you could live without me, but that is such bullshit! I mean Jackson, c'mon, if you decide to go run in front of a bus, that is not my problem. And I don't want to hurt you, but that's the God's honest truth!"

"Frank, baby...." My voice cracked as I reached for him.

He stepped back, and I saw the disgust all over his face.

It ripped through me, tore out my heart, and left me gutted and breathless. That he could look at me like that, like I was a pathetic loser, after looking at me like I was a god so many times before, was crippling.

"Listen to me," he demanded, his voice rising, roaring over the pouring, driving rain. "I can't make you do anything.

I can't make you kill yourself or be happy, I can't make you the kind of man I need, and I definitely can't make you do anything that you don't want to do. I don't have that kind of power. You make the choices for you, Jackson, and you have to choose now to leave me the fuck alone, because my life that I shared with you, that I had with you, is over."

Two years gone because he fell out of love.

"I'm sorry I hurt you, and I'm so sorry for how it ended, but I had a chance to be happy and I took it. I wish you all the best, Jackson, but I don't want to see you anymore. I don't want to talk to you or go to bed with you; I just want you to be gone."

I looked at his soft blue eyes, saw the pleading, and finally heard the beseeching words.

"Go away. Please go away."

I shuddered, freezing, in the rain.

"There's nothing here for you anymore."

I turned and ran toward the edge of the balcony. There was no call of caution, no concern at all. If I died, I died. He had moved beyond me. And he said he was a prick because he had stayed with me even as he fell out of love, so that when he left, he didn't give a damn anymore. He didn't crave my touch—he abhorred it. He didn't miss my voice—just the thought grated. He had taken all he could. He was finished with me in every way. I had nothing to give him, and he wanted nothing from me.

As I soared through the downpour, flying from one rooftop to the next, I realized that I had never been so cold. I didn't even hurt anymore; there was only the lingering numbness. The next night I followed him but stayed out of sight. I saw him at dinner with Rene and their friends, his new circle. I watched him laugh and wipe crumbs from his new boyfriend's lips with his thumb, saw him lean in, press a kiss to the side of the man's throat, watched Rene throw an arm around him and tuck him against his side. They were all over each other on the way out of the restaurant.

The catcalls and whistles from friends made them smile, and then they fell into a cab and were gone. I stood on a ledge above the building, like some psychotic Batman, and put my head back to howl.

Days passed, weeks, and I realized, finally, that there was nothing left to vent. I was cried out, screamed out, and just plain wrung out. The rage was gone; all that was left was a horrible hole where my heart used to be. I was empty.

I felt nothing at all.

I went on patrol, and when I was attacked, I killed. I didn't think anymore, I didn't judge, didn't wonder about the meaning in the act of destruction. I just did it. I had always had an image of myself as a good man, a righteous man, but now I was simply dealing out death because it was my job.

"You're acting like this," Ryan had said as he hosed me off on Malic's back porch, "because there's no one to tell you when the end is."

"What are you talking about?" I asked as I stood there, letting him blast blood and flesh and muscle off my body.

The carnage of the night was all over me, in my hair, on my clothes, and Malic would not let me traipse gore through the home he shared with Dylan. I had to be rinsed off first. It felt like a riot hose had been turned on me.

"Did you hear me?"

"Yeah," I yelled back. "I just don't get what you mean."

He released the sprayer for a second and looked at me.

"When I get home after I've been hunting, Julian feeds me or puts me in the shower or fucks me."

"Oh God," I groaned. This was not what I needed to hear.

He sprayed me in the face.

"Fuck, Ry!"

"You have nobody who loves you anymore, you stupid prick. There's nobody at home waiting, and so that's why you're doing what you're doing."

"What am I doing?"

He ignored me. "Think about Malic before Dylan showed up, and think about Malic now—night and day difference, right? A warder needs a hearth or their moral compass gets all fucked up, and that's why you're doing this."

"Doing what?" I asked again.

"Trying to get yourself killed!"

"I am not! I'm fine and—"

"You're not fine! You haven't been fine since you caught Frank and Rene together. Do you have any idea what you did tonight, Jacks?"

"I—"

"You leaped into the middle of a nest! Malic and I had to fight our way in there just to reach you!"

"And I was fine."

"You have the same death wish that Malic used to have, but with you it's worse because he was careless but you're suicidal."

"I am not! I—"

He shot me in the face again with the hose.

"Fuck!"

"I know you're not sure if you're a good man anymore, Jacks, because there's nobody you trust anymore to tell you."

And the last guy I had actually trusted to tell me what I was or wasn't had left me with the thought that I was a selfish prick.

"All you can see is the bad right now in everything."

Especially in myself.

"You gotta stop this."

I put my head back, starting to freeze with the water blasting away at me.

"That was insane tonight, Jacks. You just—you killed so many demons, and you were unstoppable, and that scared the fuckin' shit out of me."

I had not meant to scare him. I didn't mean to scare anyone, but it seemed to be all I was doing lately.

"Warder."

I snapped out of my thoughts, having drifted far afield as I strolled, and realized that I had taken a wrong turn and was walking in the Tenderloin district at night, close to Folsom. Not the best neighborhood, not that I was worried. I did have supernatural powers I could use if things got dicey.

"Warder," the voice called again.

Looking around, I saw no one.

"You would make a terrible ninja."

I looked up then and saw him, crouching above me on a window ledge, dark eyes glittering in the moonlight like the predator he was.

"What do you want?"

His smile, the one that showed off his fangs, made my stomach tighten. He was dangerous, and fighting with him, just to see what would happen, was the only thing lately that held any sort of interest for me.

"You wanna play?"

I stopped moving and stared up at him. "What are you wearing?"

It was not, apparently, the question he was expecting.

He leaped down, falling the twenty feet to the ground, hitting hard, on stiff legs like I never could. I had to bend at the knee to take the impact.

I rolled my eyes and got a waggle of eyebrows in return.

"You don't like the leather trench?" he asked me.

"It's stupid and very Hollywood and makes you look like a douche."

"Huh."

"Just sayin'." I yawned.

He squinted at me. "I should take fashion advice from a man who doesn't shave and who dresses like an out-of-work house painter."

I shrugged because he was right and turned away from him as it started to drizzle.

"Since when do warders carry guns?" he inquired, catching up with me easily, falling into step beside me.

"How do you know I'm carrying a gun?"

"I can smell the metal."

"Impressive."

"Kyries have good noses."

"I guess," I agreed, hands shoved into my pockets.

"Tell me about the gun."

It didn't matter, so I told him. And it was odd, would have been odd to other people, but I saw the kyrie a lot; our paths crossed constantly now when I was patrolling and he was hunting. We had developed a prickly, cautious ceasefire.

Because I really had no interest in killing him anymore, and when we did fight, it was to injure, not kill. We stopped at blood being drawn. I knew the reason, and it was simply that after having my heart wrenched from my chest, not much else mattered. And he was not, contrary to my sentinel's belief, really dangerous. He was not a demon either. His kind, kyries, had never done anything to me or anyone I knew, and honestly the man, creature, had saved one friend of mine, Malic, and had rescued another friend's hearth, Simon. Trying to separate his head from his body seemed like a big waste of time. Although, if he was going to start dressing like he belonged in the *Matrix*... it might be time to reconsider.

"Stop," he said suddenly.

I stilled and turned my head to see him.

"Aren't you going to attack me?"

"Why?" I asked him. "Are you gonna attack me?"

"Perhaps."

I shrugged. "Lemme get rid of this gun first, and then I gotta go home and get my sword, and I'll meet you somewhere if you want and we can go at it."

He squinted at me. "You don't have a sword on you?"

"You can see I don't," I said irritably. "Can't you smell the metal or lack thereof?"

"That was snide."

I scoffed at him.

"Why not?"

"Why not what?"

"Why aren't you armed?

"I was drinkin'."

He made a face as my phone rang.

"Hold that thought," I said, darting under some scaffolding to get out of the rain that was coming down a little harder. "Hello."

"Jackson, this is Cal Thompson, how are you?"

Client. "Oh I'm good. Thank you for asking, sir. What can I do for you?"

He cleared his throat. "Jackson, I have a matter, a very personal matter, that I need your help with. I'm in Zurich on business until the end of the month, but I have a situation there in California, down in Malibu, that requires immediate attention."

"Of course, how can I be of help?"

"It must be handled with the utmost discretion."

"Always."

He sighed deeply. "I know, you've never failed me in the past even with the scandal with Southland and the little misunderstanding there."

Misunderstanding my ass, it was corporate espionage. I had stolen back what had been stolen from him, but two wrongs did not make a right. I was still in deep shit if anyone ever figured out who had broken into a million-dollar facility.

The security had been impressive, but I had gifts others didn't have. I didn't tell my sentinel about my nefarious activity. He would not have been pleased. We were always supposed to use our power for good. I didn't always adhere to the warder code of conduct; it just wasn't in me to be good all the time. It was exhausting.

"Jackson." He sighed deeply. "I will pay you double your usual fee as well as all expenses and a bonus commission that you can set yourself if you and your team can be at my son's home in Malibu by tomorrow afternoon."

It was already nine at night, but really, what else did I have to do?
"Absolutely," I agreed, watching the kyrie come toward me.

The walk was a strut, fluid, graceful but with obvious confidence. Not the swagger that I had that pissed people off, this came from years of people staring, stepping aside for him, and reaching out to touch him. He was amazing-looking, and he knew it because he didn't have a modest bone in his beautiful, sculpted body.

"I'll be there, sir. Email me everything I need, and I'll be in touch in the morning."

"Excellent," he said, and I heard the relief in his voice. "I will be in your debt, Jackson."

"No you won't, 'cause you're gonna pay me." I smiled into my phone.

"I love your honesty." He clipped his words. "It's in rare supply these days."

"Amen to that." I chuckled as I hung up my phone.

Raphael's smoky topaz eyes flicked over me from head to toe, and I found myself caught in his heated gaze.

"So it looks like I can't play," I told him, my breath catching as he stepped closer. I was noticing things about him lately that I had not seen before—the hard, muscular lines of the man, his long aquiline nose, high cheekbones, and thick eyebrows. "Sorry."

"Where are you going?" he asked, lifting his hand, taking hold of the lapel of my peacoat, letting his hand just hang on it.

"I have to go to Malibu."

"That's terrible. What a tragedy for you."

I smirked at him. "Well, ya know, perils of the job."

He lifted his other hand and slid it around the side of my neck. I closed my eyes under his touch. It had been months since anyone had pressed skin to mine, and I forgot how good it felt. Not that my asshat friends didn't touch me, but that was different. This was different.

"I gotta go home," I told him.

"You're trembling," he said, leaning in, and I felt his breath on my collarbone.

"If you just want some blood"—I shivered—"go find a donor."

"I don't want blood," he told me before his mouth opened on the base of my throat.

"Fuck," I groaned, hands fisted on his ridiculous leather trench coat, making sure he couldn't get away.

His tongue swirled over the spot, and even though I decided that I didn't care even if he bit me, he began kissing a trail up the side of my neck to my jaw.

I let my head fall back against the hard brick wall and felt his knee wedge between my legs before his thigh was shoved into my groin. I hissed in agony.

"You're like a bow that's been drawn too tight and left,"

he whispered, kissing along the line of my jaw to my chin and up.

I leaned forward at the same time he drew back. Our eyes locked together, and I saw the heavy-lidded hunger, the dilated pupils, and then the man behind him.

"Shit," I yelled, hurling him off me, sideways, slamming him into the wall as a knife was buried in my side.

It was like a burning razor was driven into my flesh. I yelled as the man yanked it out of me and drove forward again. Raphael grabbed him, yelling in Spanish. I could tell the language—I had a working understanding of it—but the words tumbled out too fast, too clipped and guttural for me to catch them.

I saw the shadow to my left and pitched sideways before the man who swung at me with his katana could complete his killing stroke. Stretching out, lengthening my body even though it hurt like hell, I used both hands and caught his wrist, wrenching the sword free, holding it tight as I turned and waited for his next attack.

His jaw looked like it unhinged, his mouth opening to grotesque proportion, filled with hundreds of needle-like teeth. He snarled and lunged. I was concentrating so hard on him that I missed the creature behind me. Claws drove deep into my right shoulder at the same time the demon in front of me charged. I slammed my body as hard as I could back against the creature, ramming him into the side of the building. Pinned there, he released his hold so I could whip the katana up and then down, beheading the demon with a wide slicing arch. The hole in the sidewalk was instant, sucking him through a black-hole vortex so fast that I had to throw myself forward or be devoured by the darkness as well. Whirling around, I faced the demon that had taken half my shoulder with him.

"Warder," he gasped, shivering, the horror all over his face.

I was startled. He hadn't been after me?

Head back, his body went dim and was gone, dematerializing right in front of me.

He had not been there for me.

"You fuck!"

I looked up and saw Raphael with his hand on the chest of the demon who had driven a long serrated knife into my side. He was shoving the blade into the throat of the creature inch by inch, strong enough to drive it through muscle and bone and into the brick-and-mortar wall behind him. The demon was hanging there, twitching for a moment, black blood pumping out of the wound before his head fell sideways, dead.

It was gruesome, not the death a warder dealt, not clean and tidy and fluid-free. I felt the bile rise in my throat before I went to my knees, clutching at my side. I saw blood seeping through my fingers as I tried to breathe.

Raphael rushed across the space separating us, skidding to a halt, dropping down beside me. I felt his hands on me, one on my back, the other on my chest.

"You should go," I told him, freezing suddenly, beginning to shake. "I have to call somebody, and I'm gonna hafta take a trip to see my sentinel. You don't wanna be here when another warder shows up."

The muscles in his jaw clenched. "I want to stay."

I reached into the pocket of my peacoat. "Do me a favor—hold on to this gun for me. I might need it down the road if that guy ever goes after Simon again, so if you could just put it somewhere that you could put your hands on it, I'd be appreciative."

He made a sound in the back of his throat as he took the weapon from me. "I can heal you if you let me, and then you don't have to see your sentinel."

The thought was appealing. "But I have to be in Malibu tomorrow. If you fix me up, can I do that?"

His brows furrowed, and he shook his head fast.

"See, I gotta be good by the morning." I forced a smile, closing my eyes for a second, letting the need flow through me and out, releasing the call for aid. "Okay"—I opened my eyes—"now you really have to get outta here. Whoever shows won't understand me bleeding and you here with a dripping knife."

"I fear no warder."

I was going to speak, but my body shuddered with the answering call of a fellow warder. It rolled through me, warm, comforting... Ryan.

"Go already," I ordered him.

"I told you." His voice cracked. "I fear no warder."

"But Ry's coming and you really should be afraid of him," I said. "'Cause even though Marcus and Malic are bigger and Leith's smarter and I'm meaner"—I grinned—"he's the fastest. Ryan's a killing machine, and he's usually logical, but he's not gonna really see all this. He's only gonna see me."

"I too only see you."

It was crap, but it was flattering crap. "Go away."

"You don't want me hurt."

"Not today," I told him. "And get rid of your mess."

Clearly he did not want to go.

"Please."

He rose, and I put my head back and waited for Ryan Dean.

"I will see you soon, warder," I heard Raphael say.

But I would be gone in the morning. When was he planning to visit?

III

THE house was huge. As I sat beside Cielo Jones in the rented silver Lexus, I tried to find a position in the seat that would not put any pressure on my right side. It hurt every time I moved, and when I winced, my friend and business partner noticed.

"You should have stayed home."

"I'm fine," I lied for the tenth time in the last half an hour.

"You're not," he told me, guiding the car down the long paved drive toward the front door. "And this is some place."

It was. The house looked like a huge beach cabana complete with an enormous entryway, fans that ran the length of the wooden porch, and double French doors. Once we were out of the car and on the front steps, I found the panel beside the front door, punched in the code—my employer's late wife's birthday—and gave Cielo a nod. He used the keys that had arrived from private courier at the airport before we left San Francisco and opened the front door. The smell of marijuana hit me even from where I was.

"Shit." Cielo chuckled, waving his hand in front of his face. "Even I like to indulge on occasion, but Christ."

I turned and looked over my shoulder at the six other men walking up the stairs behind Cielo. The looks on their faces, between annoyed and amused, made me shrug.

"For fuck's sake, Jacks." One of them, a man who had been with me for over three years, Miguel Andrade, shot me a look.

"What?"

Cielo moved to walk inside, but Miguel took hold of his shoulder, stopping him.

"Me first," he grumbled, brushing his suit jacket back to reveal his holstered Glock as he walked into the house.

The others followed behind him, with Cielo and finally me bringing up the rear.

It looked like a Roman orgy in the house. There were people everywhere in various stages of undress, the house itself looked like the morning after a raging frat party, and it smelled like pot and puke and piss and beer.

"Are you kidding?" Miguel snapped at me. "This is clean-up, Jacks; you didn't need muscle. You needed Chase and Brooke."

I usually brought Chase Holmes and Brooke Canellas and their teams when it was more of an intervention than security, but it was at that moment that a big muscular guy in boxers came charging down the staircase from the second floor. He had a gun in his hand.

"See," I told Miguel, gesturing at the gunman.

Six guns were drawn fast and pointed at the man with shouts to put the gun down and get on the goddamn ground.

I had never seen a big macho guy come so unglued and move so fast. I thought he was going to pee his pants.

It was chaos after that as Miguel secured the guy, handcuffing him, and the rest of the team, three upstairs and two downstairs, started sweeping the house. Normally I would have gone, but I hurt, so I went out onto the vast patio and waited.

Cielo joined me minutes later, sitting down across the table from me, opening up his laptop and turning the Cincinnati Reds baseball cap around on his head, the bill backward as he began tapping away.

"You should have stayed home," he said without looking up at me.

"It's my company. Mr. Thompson called me."

"It's my company too. Just because you own fifty-one percent and I own forty-nine percent doesn't mean that me being here wouldn't be enough."

"He called me," I said again, rubbing the bridge of my nose. "And it's my responsibility. Shut up already."

"That's mature."

"Please shut up."

"Asshole," he barked at me, and I was surprised enough at his outburst to look up at him from the screen of my phone. "Without you, none of us have anything. You're it."

You're the company. Please do not fuck around with your life."

"I'm not gonna die." I scowled at him.

"Or mine."

"I'm fine," I insisted, wanting him to actually believe me.

"But you did need stitches," Miguel said from behind me, shoving two men out onto the patio and down into chairs. "So just take it easy."

"I am," I told him, motioning at the two. "I let you do all the heavy lifting today."

He grunted and walked back toward the house. "I'm gonna clear everyone out. If you hear yelling, just never mind."

"Do I ever question you?" I called over to him.

I heard him make a noise before I turned my head to look at the two men sitting beside me. I lifted my sunglasses and looked at them both. "Good afternoon."

"Who the fuck are you guys?" The taller of the two men barked at me, ready to lift up out of the Adirondack chair he had been shoved down into.

"Just calm down," I told him. "We work for Calvin Thompson." My eyes flicked over to the heavyset man beside him. "Your father."

The young man gasped. "We called the police."

"And they're not coming," I informed him. "We were there already this morning, giving them our credentials and contact information. Both the sheriff's department and your local police department as well as your private security company know we're here."

"Who are you?" the other man shouted at me.

"Do not yell at us," Cielo warned him, looking at both men, tearing his eyes away from the screen of his laptop.

"We work for his father"—he pointed at Hayden Thompson—"and we're here to shut down Xanadu and rein in all this ridiculous spending."

Both men stared at him.

"I'm Cielo Jones, and this is my partner, Jackson Tybalt. Our company, Guardian Limited, provides security, accounting, and basic intervention and lockdown services to high-end clients. Your father, Calvin Thompson, has given us all access to your accounts, your home, and your list of employees."

He just stared at Cielo.

"How can he do that?" the other man asked him.

"Because he foots the bill for the lap of luxury," Cielo informed him. "And as of an hour ago, all of your assets are frozen, Mr. Thompson. Your credit cards, every check you've written, absolutely everything is being scrutinized by our accounting team. A report will then be compiled and sent to your father's accountant, and at that time we will inform you as to what accounts will be terminated and which will be continued."

"Wait," he said, leaning forward, hands on the table. "I have people who work for me on vacation with their families who—"

"Mr. Campbell, your groundskeeper." Cielo cut him off.

"We know about him. Of the people who work for you, as far as I can tell, he's the only one who actually does work. His trip to Disneyland with his family is the only secured payment that we approved."

Hayden was stunned; it was all over his face. "But Javier...." He turned and looked at the gorgeous man sitting beside him. The guy looked like a model, all smooth caramel skin and big brown eyes. "He has school and a club membership and—"

"It's called getting a job," I growled at him before turning on Javier de Souza. "Your tuition is paid for this semester, and that's it. Your expense account, your club membership—"

"Clothes allowance," Cielo offered.

"Clothes allowance," I echoed, "all of that is gone. You wanna continue to live here, fine. We don't get to say who stays and who goes, but to stay here, you have to submit to a drug test that includes hair and blood, and an extensive background check. If you wish to operate a vehicle owned by Mr. Thompson, you need to submit a driving record to us, an abstract, with proof of insurance. Once we leave, there will be an onsite handler in charge of security and all house and personal accounts who you will be able to obtain all your clearances from."

"He can't do this." Hayden gasped, looking at me. "My father can't just get rid of all my friends and—"

"I'm out of here," Javier announced, getting up and walking around the table.

"Wait," Hayden called, getting up, running after him.

We heard the begging, the cajoling, and the apologizing.

I winced when Javier told him that the only thing he cared about was the money. It was the only thing that had made sleeping with a fat fuck bearable.

"Ouch." Cielo sighed, going back to what he was doing, closing more accounts, sending emails, basically turning off Hayden Thompson's life as he knew it. "I guess you shouldn't just live off Daddy."

"Nope," I agreed, sighing heavily, getting up and walking to the edge of the patio that looked out onto the Pacific Ocean. "God, it's pretty here."

"You didn't tell me."

"I didn't tell you what?" I asked, looking up and down the beach, waving at some women who were jogging by. Four sets of hands waved back, all tanned, blonde Barbie beautiful.

"You didn't tell me how you got hurt."

I turned around, putting my glasses back down over my eyes to regard my friend. "What do you want to know?"

"I want to know if the demon that stabbed you is the same one who cut clean through your shoulder."

"How did you know I was hurt?"

"I saw you in your office before we left this morning."

I grinned at him. "Why were you skulking around? Are you trying to catch me naked?"

He stared at me. "If we could be serious for, like, half a second, that'd be great."

I groaned and started to turn around.

"Jackson!"

I had no choice but to look at him.

"I know all about you, asshole, so tell me what the fuck."

So I told him about the kyrie and the demons and how pissed Ryan had been at me and how worried Jael had been and how I ended up going home alone to an empty house.

He sighed heavily. "I know you've been a basket case since Frank left but
—"

"I don't wanna talk about that."

We stared at each other.

"Listen," he finally said. "You're in pain, I know that.

But please do not have a death wish because you're inconsolable. I need you."

"Yeah, I know." I sighed, turning back to face the beach.

"It smells good here, huh?"

"It smells like the ocean," he grumbled. "And I hate it."

"You're just bein' a dick."

"I need you alive and well, and I know that Frank tore your heart out, but
—"

"Just let it go." I cut him off.

He was quiet, and after a few minutes, I relaxed when I realized he was actually going to do what I asked and drop it.

"You think that if you submerge yourself in violence that you'll stop hurting."

I rolled my eyes but didn't say anything.

"Frank's an idiot."

"Frank needed more."

"You would have turned yourself inside out to be whatever he wanted," he told me. "We both know that."

I couldn't argue, because it was the truth. Two years with Frank Sullivan and three months without him had told me, if I didn't know already, what I would have done.

"Just be careful. It's not just you."

And I knew that.

"Jackson."

I looked over my shoulder and saw Owen, another of my team, giving me a very pained look. "What?"

"He's crying."

I squinted at him. "I'm sorry?"

"The kid, the son, he's upstairs locked in his bathroom, and he's crying. Do you want us in there? Do you want the door down?"

"Yeah, I dunno what he's got in there."

"Will do." He began to turn away.

"Is the house cleared?"

"Yep, all clear."

"Great."

He left, and I was alone again with my partner.

"Did you hear me?"

And he meant from earlier.

"How could I not?"

"Okay."

Finally we were done.

"HEY."

Hours later I turned from the enormous television screen to look at Hayden as he walked into the living room.

"Hi," I greeted him.

He rubbed his tousled curls and flopped down on the other end of the couch away from me. "Where is everyone?"

"All gone except me." I sighed, realizing how tired I was.

"And the security guards outside, of course."

"Why do I need security guards?"

"Because we're on lockdown here," I told him.

"I gave a ton of people the security code for my house, you know."

"It doesn't matter. We changed everything today."

"You sure as hell did."

I shrugged. "I can't be sorry about that. This is my job, not to mention you needed this bad. I have never seen someone with more people taking

advantage of him. Your life should serve as a warning to others of what not to do."

"Gee, thanks."

"You're welcome."

"Have people been trying to get in?"

"Yep."

"Shit," he groaned. "All my friends are gonna be so pissed."

"As far as I can tell, you don't have any friends besides Maria Santos and some guy named Christian."

"Christian," he breathed out. "God, I haven't seen him in months."

I shrugged. "Well, so far, like I said, only he and Maria check out."

"God, they both probably hate me."

"Nope," I told him. "Cielo talked to Maria, and I talked Christian. They would both love to see you. Maria wants you to come back to school, and Christian says that you're welcome to come by the hospital and see him whenever you like."

"He's doing his residency. He's gonna be a pediatrician."

"So he said."

He shook his head. "I'm so stupid."

"You're young; you're supposed to be stupid."

"Oh yeah?"

"Well, to an extent." I chuckled. "But your quota for dumbass has been met. You're not allowed to be taken advantage of again. We're basically going to

monitor you from now on. I'll see you once a month, Cielo will talk to you every week, and the security company will monitor your home starting from now. You can go wherever you want, of course, but all your credit cards have been suspended except the one for approved transactions."

"I could just get a job, and then I wouldn't be dependent on my father's money."

"And if you have to work, then we won't worry about what you're doing when you're not," I explained. "You get it, right?"

"Yeah, shit. It all makes sense."

"I mean, your father knows that he basically put you here by enabling this lifestyle, but now that he sees what you're doing with your wealth and privilege, he's gonna make you live how he wants or he's gonna make you want to have your own life by getting a job. Either choice you make, toe the line or strike out on your own and build from the ground up, he's happy."

"Fuck."

"What're you gonna do?"

"For now, until I decide what I want to do, I'm going to live here under lock and key."

"It's not like that. You get everything back tomorrow.

There are just stipulations now. There are no more big wads of cash going out; there are limits on everything. You have a budget that you'll have to stick to, and if you go over it, then you have to call your accountant, who is now Cielo, and explain what you need and why."

"That black guy that was with you?"

"Just guy would suffice," I told him.

"Shit, I didn't mean—"

"It's fine."

"Christ."

"It sucks, but you made your bed. Lie in it."

"You're all heart."

"Poor little rich boy, you're breakin' my heart."

His eyes flicked to mine, and I saw the hatred there for a second. "How long was I sleeping?"

I checked my dive watch. "About nine hours."

"Holy shit." He gasped, eyes wide.

"I'm thinking you needed the rest."

He sighed deeply. "God, I don't even know what I need."

I smiled at him. "I think you need to take a vacation from your life here and figure out what the hell you want to do with it."

The hatred I saw had been replaced by weariness. He looked wrung out. The dark circles under his eyes, how bloodshot they were, his cracked lips, the stubble, all of it spoke of a man who was drained dry.

"Listen, I am sorry for the all-or-nothing approach that had to be taken here, but you were this close to overdosing on drugs, going to jail, or just turning up dead. You don't see it, don't get it, but I swear it's true."

His wounded eyes surveyed me. "You know, you don't look so great yourself."

"I was in a knife fight yesterday. I have an excuse."

"No shit." He perked up a little, probably wishing I had died.

"No shit." I smiled at him.

He was silent for a few minutes. "Did my father tell you I was gay?"

"Yes, he did."

"Javier was supposed to be my boyfriend."

"I figured."

"You don't care?"

"Since I'm gay too, not so much," I told him.

His smile came slowly until I saw the first signs of life.

"I really did have a lot of dead weight in my life, huh?"

he offered as a peace offering.

I arched an eyebrow for him.

His head fell back, and the laughter bubbled up out of him. If he could laugh at himself, at the mess he'd made, he was going to be okay.

When the mirth had run out of him, after the tears were shed, the heavy sigh exhaled from deep down, he looked over at me.

"If I get your old man on the phone, will you talk to him?"

He nodded.

"You gotta know that this is love and not control."

"It feels like control," he told me.

We sat there together on his leather couch in the great room surrounded by opulence, and I understood that for all of it, for all the possessions, he had nothing without his family.

"It's love," I assured him.

"Are you sure?"

"I am. Your father wants to give you everything, and he almost gave you too much."

"I just want someone to love."

"Join the club," I told him.

IV

I STAYED three days, hired Hayden all new staff as well as a personal assistant and a personal trainer and a live-in maid.

He looked different when I left than when I had arrived, and when I got back home to my office, Cielo informed me that the commission on the job put us squarely in the black. He had paid all our bills, the mortgage on the office, all salaries and bonuses, and even had money left over to get new software he'd had his eye on and more gadgets for surveillance. I had another new phone, and so did everyone else. Miguel held it up for me to see while Cielo gushed.

"Just because technology gives him a hard-on, do we all have to get excited?"

I went back to answering emails and was still at it when Leith Haas came through the door at a quarter to six that evening.

"What the fuck did you do?"

"About what?" I asked, looking up at him, leaning back in my chair.

He rushed across the room to stand in front of my desk.

"Marcus says that you talked to Eric Donovan a week ago.

He followed Simon."

"Yes."

"And you didn't think I should know that my boyfriend was still being stalked by a psychopath?"

"No."

"No?" he barked at me.

"No, I handled it, it's handled, case closed."

He stared at me with dark aqua eyes, deciding, and I held the gaze intently. After several minutes he took a breath.

"I know you wouldn't let anything happen to Simon."

"No, I wouldn't," I agreed. "I know what he means to you."

He nodded. "Do you know where Eric Donovan is now?"

"Yes."

"You do?" He was startled.

"Yes, I do. I'm in security and surveillance. I know where everyone is that I keep tabs on."

"Oh."

I rolled my eyes and got up from my chair and walked to the window that was getting pelted hard with rain. "He moved to Boston."

"Boston?"

"Yes. He's getting married and going to work for his fiancée's father. I don't expect him back."

"How can he get married if he's gay?"

"You can get married to a man in Massachusetts."

"You know what I mean! He's not marrying a man, is he?"

"No."

"Then?"

I turned to look at him. "Why are you asking me? You wanted to know where he is—that's where he is. Beyond that, I have no idea and I could give a shit."

He just stared at me.

"What are you going to get Simon for Christmas?"

Several seconds ticked by.

"What?" he asked finally.

"It's coming up, Christmas, I mean. What's your plan?"

"Oh."

"No idea, huh?"

"No."

I went back to watching the rain.

"Ryan said you were hurt before you went to LA."

"I went to Malibu, but yeah."

"And you're okay now?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Well, Marcus has some kind of fancy dinner he's supposed to go to tomorrow, tuxedos and everything, and he wanted to take Joe and go, but if _____"

"That's fine. I can patrol with you."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Okay. I'll meet you down by the Federal Building after nine then."

"After nine tomorrow. Got it."

He was at the door when he called me. I turned to look at him.

"You're a good friend, Jacks."

At least I was something. "Thanks."

When he was gone, I went back to watching the dark gray day turn into a black, starless night.

I decided to grab something before I headed for home because I knew there was nothing to eat, my fridge and cupboards were bare, and I didn't feel like stopping and buying groceries and then cooking. Doing all that prep for one person was just too much. So I ran through the rain and ducked into my favorite delicatessen after work to grab a sandwich. I was headed for the salad bar when I came around the corner and found myself suddenly face-to-face with Rene Favreau.

I froze.

He caught his breath.

We must have looked really stupid.

What was the appropriate thing to say?

Gray eyes locked on my face. "Jackson."

I exhaled fast and went to move around him.

"Wait."

I stopped, and he stepped back in front of me. It was only then that I saw the cut lip, black eye, and bruised cheek. "What happened?"

He cleared his throat. "Frank."

I scoffed before I could stifle it. There was no way.

He took a breath and slipped by me. I was going to go after him, but it hit me that it was truly none of my business. I had no more say in Frank Sullivan's life, and he had made his position on me being in his very clear the last time we had seen each other. It was strange that just the mention of the man's name had not put my heart in a vise.

Maybe, just maybe, after three months, closer to four, I was finally starting to see my way clear. I hoped so.

The salad bar was calling, and as I picked what I wanted, I saw a woman eyeing the beets disdainfully. When she looked up, she caught me staring.

"I don't eat those," I told her.

She bit her bottom lip as she smoothed a hand over her very pregnant stomach. "I'm supposed to be eating light, but all I want is steak all the time."

I scowled at her, and she laughed.

"Just looking at all this salad makes me wanna hurl, but the beets are especially heinous."

"I agree"—I grinned at her—"about the beets."

"Beets taste like dirt," she told me.

"I'm sure the American Beet Growers would disagree."

She laughed and then tipped her head, studying my face. "I think I know you."

"Nice pickup line."

"I'm pregnant. Who am I gonna pick up?"

"Maybe I'm into that."

She rolled her eyes, lifting her hand so I could see the rock on her finger.
"There's this too."

"That doesn't stop some people."

"Agreed"—she sighed—"but I'm still in love with the big dumb jerk."

Enjoying her phrasing, the banter, and her lovely voice, I let some of the tension drain out of me from seeing Rene.

"So...." She chuckled, and it had a nice sound, full and deep. "Who do we both know?"

I shrugged.

"Do you have kids in elementary school?"

"No kids."

"Not yet," she clarified.

"Do I look like I could be some kid's dad?" I scoffed at her.

"Yeah"—she nodded—"you've got the look."

And that was the most astounding thing anyone had ever said to me, that I looked parental. "Do I?"

"Yes."

Her tone, the look in her gorgeous jade-colored eyes, the laugh lines around them, her dimples, her high cheekbones—she was just radiant. "I think maybe you should come home with me anyway, married or not."

"That'd be a neat trick. Aren't all you guys gay?"

"All of what guys?"

"All you warders."

It was like she hit me—all the air slammed out of my lungs.

Her smile was huge. "You're one of Ryan's friends."

"Oh." I nodded, taking a settling breath, getting my bearings, remembering where I had seen her before, in Ryan Dean's living room. "You belong to Julian, who now belongs to Ryan."

"Yes." She beamed at me, walking around the salad bar to reach me. I was surprised. I thought she would stop, but she kept coming, right up to me, lifting up, reaching. "I'm Phoebe Vega, Cash's wife."

I bent so she could bring me down to her with an arm around my neck, plant a kiss on my cheek, give me a quick hug before she pulled back. It was nice. No one ever hugged me anymore, and I missed it like crazy.

"I—"

"Jackson."

We both turned, and there, no more than three feet from me, was Rene Favreau. Apparently he had not left me after all. But why he was standing there looking like he was ready to start bawling was beyond me.

"What's with—"

"I need to talk to you."

"I don't have time to—"

"I need you to make time."

Shit.

"You're the only one I can talk to, and I know it—"

"Stop," I ordered him. "I'll meet you outside."

"Are you okay?" Phoebe asked him gently.

He moved fast up beside her, and because he was acting so weird, I reached for the bright, bubbly woman I had sort of fallen in love with and drew her protectively to my side.

"Come now," he ordered, but it sounded more like a plea.

"I'll be right behind you."

He looked at Phoebe, looked her up and down, sizing her up, before he turned fast and walked away.

"What was that about?" She sounded worried.

"Nothing," I soothed her, passing her my sandwich. "Eat this instead; you'll love it. I swear. Get a salad and split it with your husband."

She opened her mouth to say something.

"It's okay," I promised, kissing her forehead before I whipped around her and headed for the door.

Outside, I saw Rene halfway down the street, standing in the rain holding open the door of a cab. I moved quickly along the sidewalk and reached him fast.

"You first," he said, his voice flat.

I slipped into the backseat, and he was in behind me, barking directions to the driver and falling back with a deep release of breath.

"Tell me what's wrong," I asked after we had gone several rainy blocks in silence.

"He's lost his mind."

I crossed my arms and waited.

He reached out to touch me but stopped himself and let his hand fall back down to his side. "He gets up in the middle of the night, and when I follow

him, he's attacking people and grabbing them, and he used to just scare them, but now he's attacking them and—"

"Wait." I stopped his rambling explanation. "Frank is attacking people on the street? This is what you're telling me."

"Yeah and the other night when I tried to stop him from going out we actually started fighting and—look at my face."

I had already noted the damage earlier.

He raked his fingers through his hair. "I don't expect you to believe me, but yesterday he finally came out and told me that he wants me to hunt demons with him."

Fuck.

"Demons, Jackson," he breathed out. "Holy shit. He's lost his mind."

In a sense. Hunting demons, for him, was insane. The demons themselves....

"I told him I wanted him to see someone, and he just started talking to me about warders and demons and hearths and...." He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

I cleared my throat. "Have you talked to his family?"

"I don't know his family!" He blew up. "I barely know him, and now"—his head snapped up and his eyes met mine—"I have no idea what to do!"

But I did. "Okay."

"Okay?" He was stunned. It was written all over his face.

"This is all you have to say?"

"Until I see him, yeah. That's all I fuckin' have to say."

His eyes were locked on mine.

I turned to look out at the smeared world rushing by the window.

"Jackson."

I didn't turn.

"I'm sorry."

There was no answer I could be expected to give him.

RENE had to slide a key card into a slot in the elevator to get to the penthouse. Other people got on, and I was apparently of interest. I was silent as I shed my trench coat and scarf, raked my fingers through my hair, and took off my tie. I watched the numbers light up one after another and gave nothing else my attention.

"I never realized how intimidating you are."

"Compared to Malic, I'm a fuckin' Boy Scout," I said, stepping off the elevator when it stopped, the doors opening up into a living room. Amazing the nice digs money could buy.

The room was warm, and instantly I felt a twinge of loss for the home that Frank Sullivan could create. Fire blazing away, the muted Beethoven I could hear, the dinner I could smell, pot roast maybe, and the touches everywhere that told me that Rene Favreau did not live alone. There were roses in a vase, the table was set for two, and the wine had been poured.

"Frankie!" Rene called out.

I swallowed down my heart and stood there and waited.

"I made Swiss steak and—Jackson."

If I could just keep breathing, I would really have something.

He came into the room dressed in black jeans and a pale gray Henley. He was barefoot, which I found odd in the middle of winter, but it was warm, so maybe it was fine.

"Can I talk to you a minute?"

His eyes were all over me, and I was uncomfortable for Rene for no reason that made any sense. Why did I care if my ex was checking me out in front of his current boyfriend?

"Please."

He looked over at Rene. "Why don't you go change out of your wet clothes?"

"I—"

"Please," Frank asked breathlessly. "I need a moment alone with him."

Rene looked at him a long minute and then turned to me. I could tell that for the life of him he had no idea what was the right thing to do.

"Five minutes," I told Rene. "That's all."

He was upset, and it took a lot out of him, but he left the room and us.

As soon as he was out of earshot—it was a massive space, so he had a way to go to actually exit the room—

Frank turned his curious gaze to me. "What are you doing here?"

"I hear you're hunting demons," I replied softly.

His lips parted, and that tender mouth of his that had once kissed me so sweetly now hung open in surprise.

"Dangerous business, that."

He just stared at me.

"And you said you hated everything about it."

"I just want to help," he told me, coming out of his momentary trance, putting his wineglass down on the table behind the couch.

"You miss the thrill of it, hearing about it, knowing it was real."

"I felt important."

He had been the most important thing in my life.

"I mean"—he took a step closer—"because I was there, you could do what you needed to do. I made a difference because you did."

I nodded.

"And it's the best secret ever."

"Sure."

"I figured out how I can help, and I have been."

"But why would you want to?"

"Jackson, I—"

"Why not just forget all about it?" I felt my anger rising, but I was powerless to stop it.

"I can't."

"You told me you hated that I was a warder and you hated being the hearth of a warder."

He pressed his lips together tight.

"Maybe it was just me you didn't like." I calmed, the truth, finally, rolling through me. It was useless to get mad; it was over and done with.

He sucked in a breath. "I just want to help like I said."

"By hurting them, the demons you come across."

"Yes."

"And you can tell because when you touch someone and it hurts, you know they're a demon."

He nodded.

"But it's fading already," I told him, because I knew.

"You're not hurting them anymore."

His eyes, those soft doe eyes of his, got huge and round.

"Yes. Why?"

"Why what?"

"I—my touch used to burn them and I could tell just like you said who was a demon and who wasn't but it doesn't work anymore."

"Of course not."

"But why?" He closed in on me.

"You're no longer the hearth of a warder."

It was obvious from the look on his face that he had never once considered any of what I was telling him.

"Your house isn't sealed, Frank. You need to be careful that nothing follows you home."

His eyes filled with realization that turned quickly to fear.

I shrugged. "But why would it. You're just a man. And if anything ever scares you, you can call me, all right?"

His eyes narrowed as he stepped closer to me, but when he lifted his hand toward me, I moved back beyond his reach.

"Since when?"

"Since when what?"

His eyebrows lifted. "I don't get to touch you anymore?"

"Why would you want to?"

He seemed to consider that. "I thought that Rene being sweet and gentle at first would give way to heat and power and dominance," he told me slowly, confessing, moving until he was standing in front of me, in my space, staring up into my eyes. "It didn't."

"Sweetheart of a guy all the way through, huh." I smirked at him. "Too bad for you, since you like to be fucked up against walls."

His jaw clenched as he shivered.

"No, wait, that's not you anymore, is it?"

"I told you it wasn't all I wanted. I never said I didn't want it at all."

Apparently he had gone from me manhandling him all the time to none at all from Rene. He wanted his sex life somewhere in between.

"You do a lot of your communicating through sex."

He had never complained until the end. Or maybe I had just never heard him. Whatever the case, it was done.

Rehashing was useless.

"You have nothing to say?"

"Make Rene use all your toys on you. That'll help."

Brows furrowed, and he could no longer keep my gaze.

While I had never enjoyed the role-playing that Frank did, had not liked using his assortment of whips, clamps, and various restraints, I had done as he asked because it did it for him. The part I had loved was seeing all his barriers come down and having him come apart in my hands. His gratitude, that I would put aside my own discomfort for him, had been touching to see. I thought that my actions had spoken my love for him, but it turned out that he wanted words... and a penthouse view.

"So," I said, stepping back, realizing that his scent had changed from when he used to sleep curled into my side. He didn't smell like me anymore underneath everything else. I used to be able to press my nose in his hair and inhale our bed, our sheets, and my life. "No more demon hunting, because any second now, you're gonna get your head torn off."

"Jackson," he said under his breath.

"Think of it as no longer having armor."

"Jacks."

But he didn't want me. It was the high of the hunt he was in thrall to. He was an adrenaline junkie looking for a danger fix, and I had no idea when that had happened.

"You're on the outside looking in now. Embrace this instead." I gestured around. "I would."

"I miss you," he said.

It was a lie. There was no way he missed his life with me, which was small compared to the jet-setting, high-class dream he had going with Rene. "Stop what you're doing, forget what you know, and buy a yacht or something."

He just stared at me as I started to go.

"Jackson," he called softly, seductively, just the way he used to.

I didn't stop. I walked back to the elevator instead.

When I hit the button, the doors whooshed open at the same time I heard Rene call my name. I turned to face out, and he was there, holding the doors open so I couldn't escape.

"He's fine now," I told him. "It's all done. Ask him."

He looked over his shoulder at Frank. "Tell me what's going on?"

"Everything's fine." Frank forced a smile. "I'm sorry for scaring you."

Rene was nonplussed, I could tell, at a complete loss to understand what was going on around him. And who could blame him? "One visit from your ex, and you're all fine?"

"I just needed some resolution," Frank lied, eyes flicking to mine.

I met them for seconds, wasn't sure what I saw—desire, hatred, hard to tell all of a sudden. I couldn't read him anymore because I no longer knew him.

"Jackson."

I looked at Rene, and there was pain all over his face.

"Don't think too hard about it," I cautioned him. "Move your hand."

But he didn't. He slipped into the elevator beside me instead.

"Wait," Frank yelled as the doors shut fast.

I didn't move, didn't speak, and was in fact doing a very great impression of a statue.

"Please talk to me."

"He'll be fine."

"Look at me."

After a minute, I did.

"Was he always like this?"

"Like what?"

"Manic. He has such highs and such lows.... I had no idea."

"He's not manic. He's not schizophrenic. He's not anything but him," I promised. "My guess would be that he got overly tired, that ending things with me and starting them with you took more of an emotional toll than he was willing to admit. I think he just needed to see me and have his moment of closure."

It was a really good story. I was kind of proud of myself.

"I would have thought you would have had closure when you begged him over and over to take you back. When you stalked him and—"

"Closure for him." I cut him off. "I know what I did, and I know why he left, and I'm smart enough to know that he wants you and not me."

"But being with you was more exciting than being with me. You, your business, your world is much more prone to life and death than mine."

He had no idea.

"I think he misses hearing about the excitement, all your near misses."

The man was more perceptive than I gave him credit for, and I realized that in another life, where he had not stolen the man I loved from me, we could have been friends.

"Shit," I groaned.

"What?"

The truth was that Frank wanted to go. It took two.

Rene had stolen nothing from me. Frank had run away.

"I think he misses his life with you."

"He doesn't," I said, putting on my jacket and trench coat, wrapping the scarf around my neck. "And when he's in Paris with you, you'll both forget that any of this ever happened."

"How did you know we were going to Paris?"

One of the main things that Frank had thrown up in my face was that Rene was going to show him the world that I never could. So it made sense that when the globetrotting began, it would start in the place that Frank had always wanted to see more than anything.

"I know Frank," I lied.

He nodded. "You do."

"So will you," I told him, sighing deeply as the elevator dinged loudly and the doors slid open. "Goodbye, Rene."

"I'll see you around."

I really hoped not.

"Jackson!"

I pivoted around to look at him.

"I miss Malic."

I made the international sign for a phone with my thumb and pinky.

"He won't talk to me."

"I'll put in a good word for you," I said before I took a few steps backward and then turned, jogging toward the doors. The entryway felt immense, but when I was finally outside, I felt lighter, like I could breathe.

I pulled my phone from the inside pocket of my suit jacket and called my sentinel.

"Hello?"

"Hey," I said as I shivered in the damp, chilled night air.

The rain had stopped leaving that sheen on the road and puddles on the sidewalk. It smelled wet and cold, and I breathed it in deep. "I have to talk to you. Can I come by?"

"Of course. Where are you?"

"I'm in the city, but I can be out to Sausalito in an hour or so."

"Have you eaten?"

"No."

"Excellent," he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice. "I just made some borscht. Come over and have some."

And remembering Phoebe and how much she hated beets and how much I hated them as well, I started laughing there on the street. I laughed until tears rolled down my eyes.

"For crissakes, Jaka, it's not that funny. If you don't like soup, you don't have to have any. You can have a sandwich if you want."

His comment didn't help, considering that I had started out my night with a sandwich being all I wanted.

V

THE risk, Jael had explained to me over dinner that night, which was maroon-colored soup for him and a roast beef sandwich for me, was that sometimes when a warder and hearth parted, the hearth went mad. Frank's obsession, from what Jael said, was on the healthy side compared to what he had seen and heard.

The best-case scenario, outside of a hearth and warder growing old together, was that the hearth left the warder, as Frank had done, and not the other way around. When a warder left, he or she left behind a broken heart and took away a whole other world at the same time. To be the hearth of a warder meant that you knew more than most people, understood that supernatural forces were real, and had to be, for another person, their whole life. A lot of hearths could not separate their warrior from the person they loved, and that was fine as long as the love remained. When it was time to say goodbye, it was a lot to give up.

Jael understood Frank's desire to hold on to the piece of power that he had.

"He probably does want you back, Jaka," he said, using my warder name, my call sign, handle, whatever it was, instead of my given name. "Paris is luminous, but how can it compare to the adrenaline rush of living with a warder?"

"I'm thinking Paris beats killing demons any day of the week."

"For you."

"For anybody with a brain."

He chuckled low and deep and reached out to put his hand on my face.
"You'll make a very pragmatic sentinel one day."

"Me?" I laughed at him. "You've got me mixed up with Marcus or Ryan."

He shook his head. "Rindahl hates warding and does only what he must. It's why he keeps his life with Julian so separate. You can't lead what you don't even want to follow."

"I guess," I conceded. "But Marcus?"

"Marot's dreams are in the physical world with Joey, and he won't jeopardize those to lead." He lifted his hand to shut me up when I tried to interrupt him. "Leith is far too gentle for the job, and Malic is far too rash."

"Malic would get us all killed." I smiled at Jael.

"Not purposely." He nodded. "But yes. He thinks you are all as strong as he is."

"Aren't we?"

"No. Malic is strongest, Rindahl fastest, Leith is the most logical, and Marot is the caretaker. I have never seen anyone, even in the heat of battle, check and know where everyone else is."

"That's why he should be sentinel."

"If Marot were sentinel, no chance would ever be taken.

He fears loss more than any man I know."

"And me? What am I good at?"

"Normally you're the one who leads, Jaka. Any of the others would follow you anywhere. It's a gift."

I thought about his words. "You said normally."

"Yes. You're not yourself. You seem to be in the middle of some crisis of faith that I can't help you with."

"I'll get over it."

"I hope so."

"But what if I never find another hearth?"

He shrugged. "I worry least about you even though the others fear for your sanity."

"Nice."

He smiled at me. "I have had many warders in my lifetime and been to many council sessions and met and trained warders from all over the world. I have to say that I would put the five of you—Malic, Marot, you, Rindahl, and Leith—among the best. A lot of warder clutchers are stronger individually but not collectively. The five of you work better together than any I have ever seen, and I assure you that you balance each other out quite remarkably."

"If you say so."

"I do."

"Ask another question?"

"Of course."

"Why the damn warder names?"

He squinted at me. "Some of you have dealings with a large number of the people, others do not. Leith is a welder, Malic owns a club, both of which are more solitary professions. You, Rindahl, Marot, lead very public lives, and as such, if a demon were to discover you and scream out your warder names, those that are recorded at the Labarum, all would be well."

"I guess, though Malic owning a strip club would technically qualify as him seeing and dealing with a lot of people."

"He does not strip himself."

I scoffed. "No he doesn't, thank God."

"That was very unkind."

Like I cared. I made a face watching him eat the borscht. "It looks like you're eating blood."

"That's charming."

I thought of something. "Hey, isn't next week when you take your trip to Scotland to see your intended?"

He scowled at me. "She's not my intended. She—"

"She's a sentinel too, right?"

"Yes, but—"

"And you know her family."

"Jaka—"

"It's in the bag, right?"

"You know you're the only one that actually listens when I tell you all these things, and I tell you because I have to, not because I want to, so it's quite disconcerting to have it all thrown back in my face!"

I shrugged.

"Which is why I say again, you will make an excellent sentinel when it comes time."

"Great." I dismissed him. "What's her name again?"

"Deidre." He breathed it out.

"Uh-huh."

He leaned back in his seat. "She might not like what she sees."

But for a guy in his mid-fifties, he looked pretty good.

He looked great, in fact. The lady was gonna lose her mind as long as she didn't mind the stiff neck from looking up at him all the time. "Wait, how tall is she?"

"Why does this matter?"

I gestured at him to just tell me.

"I believe she's five-eleven."

"Oh you're lucky 'cause what're you? Seven-one?"

He squinted at me. "I'm six-seven; I'm only an inch taller than Marot and two inches taller than Malic. You're six-two, for goodness sake, you're not exactly small."

But he looked huge. We all thought of Jael as a giant.

"Are you sure?"

"Am I sure what?"

"That you're only six-seven?"

He made a face like I was *the* most annoying man on the planet and got up to go to the kitchen.

"So while you're gone, we shouldn't do anything stupid, right?" I called after him.

"If you could manage."

I would really try; I couldn't speak for anybody else.

JAEL told all the others about Frank, and the following night when I was on patrol with Leith, he gave me the third degree.

He wanted to know how I had handled things with him, and when Malic and Marcus joined us, I had to recount the story all over again.

I told Malic again that he needed to patch things up with Rene.

"You guys were friends a long time," Marcus told him.

He turned his bright blue eyes on his best friend. Malic's eyes were strange; they were this Technicolor turquoise that didn't match his somber disposition in any way. "If Rene was going out with Joe, would I be talking to him?"

Marcus was easily the coolest guy I knew. Ice water ran through him, and he was completely unflappable. Nothing ever shook him. Even in a fight he retained his precise outlook on things. He compartmentalized his feelings from his actions, and what worked in battle also worked in the courtroom. The word was that he would make partner at his law firm this year. All of that flew out the window, however, when you were talking about the man he had spent the last five years of his life with. Joseph Locke was the one singular piece of Marcus Roth's world that could shake him to the core.

He turned and looked at me. "Sorry, Jacks," he said quickly and then looked back at Malic. "Agreed."

"Good," Malic said, bumping him with his shoulder. "We have to go talk to my friend Adrian Chen tonight. He thinks he's got a jiang shi in his building and asked me to check it out."

"Christ, Malic," I groused at him. "Is there anyone in your life that doesn't know you're a warder?"

"Lots." He smiled wickedly. "But unlike you, I know who to trust."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"It means besides Cielo, who have you ever told?"

I thought about it a minute. "Frank," I told them.

Leith laughed beside me, and we all turned to look at him.

"What?"

Marcus's smile was huge. "Maybe it's time to bust out of your comfort zone there, Jacks."

Maybe it was.

VI

I WAS looking for him, and a week later I was finally rewarded with a glimpse of him. I followed fast, running, racing along the pavement to catch up. He flew behind three men into a vacant warehouse, and when I reached them, I was stunned at what I saw.

The men were on the wall, held there against their will by some invisible force that kept them dangling several feet off the ground. Raphael was in the middle of the room, frozen, head back, breathing hard.

"Why are you chasing me?"

I walked into the room, the leather soles of my dress shoes scratching through the dirt as I advanced. "I wanted to talk to you," I said softly. "What are you doing with these guys?"

He looked over his shoulder at me, and I was struck by how raw his eyes looked. "Why do you care? They're demons."

But whatever he had planned might actually hurt him more than them. It might take a toll on his soul. "I don't care, but tell me what you're going to do."

"I'm going to skin them alive and then transport them back to the siphon world they came from."

"Who are they?"

He turned to face me. "Ever since I helped your fellow warder's pet—"

"Simon. We're talking about Leith's hearth right?"

"Yes," he snapped at me. "Ever since then the demon lord Saudrian has put a bounty on my head and since kyries are solitary and I have no patron, I'm kind of on my own."

He had sounded almost sad. "I'm sorry."

I got a shrug and a wry smile. "Not that it will matter soon anyway." He gestured at the demons held plastered to the wall. "My transformation is coming. I can feel it so—"

"What does that mean?"

He squinted at me. "That means that I'm going to change into a demon soon. Kyries do unless they're—kyries change."

"Unless what?"

"What are you doing here?" he growled at me, changing the subject.

I gave him a smile. "Well I was thinking that I never properly thanked you for saving Simon."

"Simon saved himself and his warder."

"Yeah but like you said, you helped. Without you they would have never made it out."

He was glaring at me.

"So again, I should thank you."

"Don't tease me warder, I bite."

I arched an eyebrow for him.

"Go away," he said gruffly and I could tell he was purposely trying to sound mean.

"C'mon, just let them go. I wanna talk to you."

He shook his head. "No, I don't want to talk to you."

"Please."

"No!" He snarled at me, flashing his teeth. "You use that word, that stupid, simple word, and you make me do things, make lots of people do things, and I hate it. You can't just say please and expect—"

"Why are you angry?" I asked softly, moving closer, reaching for him. "And why did you disappear? You've been so good at stalking me, showing up wherever I am, and then what? I lost my appeal after I almost bled to death on your boots?"

He sucked in a breath, and the demons fell from the walls. They started forward, the menace there in their slow stride, moving to attack us, but I lifted my head so they could see me, let a pulse of power run out of me and hit them. We could all do it, every warder, push a wave of energy through our own bodies and release it. And every creature from the pit knew what it was, what it felt like when it touched them and what it meant.

"Warder," one of the demons said under his breath before each of them threw their heads back, dimmed, and disappeared.

I returned my eyes to Raphael's and found him squinting at me.

"How can you say that to me?" he asked, furious.

"Say what?" I asked, reaching for the heavy black motorcycle jacket.

He meant to step away, but I grabbed and held him.

"This is a nice change from the leather duster. It fits your bad-guy image without being over the top."

"Don't—"

"Don't what?" I asked, easing him closer, putting my other hand on his hip, leaning forward, inhaling his musky scent, letting it soothe me.

"You were almost killed because of me, and I made up my mind that night that I would no longer put you in danger.

My life is filled with horrors that—"

"So is mine," I told him, moving my hands, one to the back of his neck, the other burrowing up under the cable-knit sweater he had on, under the T-shirt, until I hit warm skin.

The sound that came out of him, whine, moan, whimper all at once, told me everything I needed to know.

"I'm not afraid of your world. I live there already."

"But you—you don't, I'm going to change and—"

"Kyries only change," I said, sliding my hand over the small of his back, stroking his bare skin, "if they are not claimed. Isn't that so?"

He tipped his head back, offering, and I leaned in and pressed my parted lips to the pulse beating at the base of his throat.

"Isn't that so?" I repeated, smiling, kissing up the length of his throat and wedging my thigh against his groin at the same time.

The noises he made, the moans that came from the back of his throat as he clutched at my biceps, holding me tight through the zippered cardigan, made me smile.

"So then why run from me? Stick around."

"I don't want you to get hurt," he almost cried, shoving me off him, stepping back.

I saw it then, all his pain, all his desire, there in his ragged, red-rimmed eyes.

"Come here." I called him gruffly.

He pointed at me. "Because of me, you almost died. I don't want you to die, warden. I'd rather stay away from you than—"

"I want you." And I did. The desire for him, just to sleep with him, was nearly overwhelming. There was no one else I craved at all, no one else I

really even saw. He was it, the only bright, terrible point of light around.

"You have no idea what you're saying."

"I do."

"You don't," he shouted at me. "You don't make idle promises to a kyrie. It's not like breaking up with your whiny-ass bitch of a boyfriend. It's a gift and grants you dominion, and once it's given, you can't take it back. I will always be there; you'll never be free. It's what your sentinel warned Malic about—the thrall of a demon."

"You're not a demon," I reminded him.

The muscles in his jaw corded with the effort it took for him not to yell.

"And I'm not afraid."

"You're not afraid because you place no value on your own life."

Perhaps.

"But soon you're going to pull free of this haze of"—he shook his head—"sadness or whatever the fuck it is, and then—"

"Why're you fighting with me?"

"You cannot take this pledge so light—"

"I'm not. I swear I'm not. Just c'mere."

"You are! You said you wanted me," he yelled, "and if you do, truly do, then I'm yours, Jackson Tybalt, but once given, once you take me once, have me once, it's done."

"So the thrall of a kyrie has nothing to do with blood?"

"It has everything to do with blood, but not me taking yours, you drinking mine!"

"Show me."

He rushed back to my side, and as he came, he pulled a knife from behind his back. There were hidden sheaths in the jacket, hiding all manner of weaponry, I was sure, but the knife, dragged across his wrist in one fluid motion, the knife he cut into himself with was the only one I cared about.

"For crissakes, don't hurt yourself."

His flickering smile was breathtaking. "You're worried...

about me...."

"Don't cry," I teased him gently.

He shook his head and then grabbed me, shoving his wrist against my lips, clutching the back of my head tight, his hand fisted in my hair.

I had to open my mouth, I couldn't breathe, and the second I did, I tasted metal and felt the liquid warmth on my tongue. I swallowed, sucked, and swallowed again. I felt like a fiend and got my hands on him and wrenched free. I fell back, hitting the ground hard, and scrambled to sit up. He was on his knees close to me.

"I—"

"Look."

I lifted my eyes, and his wrist was pristine—no cut, no blood, nothing.

"Perfect," he proclaimed, and I saw that the soft, gentle look in his face was replaced by obvious hunger. The predatory look went right to my groin.

"Raphael."

"If the bond works, I heal."

"And if it didn't?"

"I'd be dead at your feet."

I caught my breath. "You stupid son of a—"

"I healed, warder."

He had.

"I'm yours."

I would have said something, but I was flat on my back with two hundred pounds of hard-muscled man on top of me, straddling my thighs, dragging his ass over my painfully engorged erection a second later.

"I belong to you now, warder."

The magnitude of what I had done, without thinking, hit me hard. And then I saw the flutter of eyelashes as he stilled above me.

"You don't want—"

"Oh I want." I cut him off, hands on the granite thighs, pulling him forward, lifting my legs to support his back.

"Come home with me."

His eyes were slits as he stared down at me. "This is not a romance, warder."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"That means that you're not ready." He studied me, my face.

"Ready for what?"

He rose fast, dragged me to my feet after him, wrenched me sideways, and then drove me across the floor face-first into the wall. The impact pushed all the air from my lungs.

As I stood, gasping for breath, he yanked and tugged at me, unbuckling my belt, working the button fly open, shucking my jeans and briefs down in a violent motion.

"What the fuck are—"

"Say stop," he whispered, his breath hot and wet in my ear. His chest was shoved against my back, and I felt his hands sliding over my ass, thighs, and hips. "Tell me to stop, even once, and I will, warder. I will."

His hands felt so good biting into my flesh, learning new territory, pressing, stroking, and then he fisted my cock, and I let my head fall back on his shoulder.

"What do you deserve, warder?"

I had no idea what he meant.

"Are you a good man?"

Was I?

"Jackson?"

I shook my head no. I was not a good man. I had driven away my hearth because I wanted too much and had nothing to give back.

"I will take as you did," he said, sliding two of his fingers into my mouth.

I licked them because I knew what was happening, coated them thoroughly, making sure they were slick and wet.

"I can hardly wait to feel that tongue on my cock."

My heart hurt, and then I felt a finger slip between my cheeks at the same time he stroked my shaft from base to head.

"Please," I begged him, my voice a throaty whisper.

I heard him spit, felt him working his fingers inside me, and it burned, the pressure, the opening not gentle but rough and jarring. My lips parted to tell him to get off me, but his hand tugging on my cock, pulling, eclipsed all else.

The first throb vibrated through me, and I pushed back on his fingers, felt my muscles give a fraction, and caught the scent of precome before the head of his shaft was pressed against my entrance.

I was vulnerable, giving, which I never did, and his hand slid over my shaft, milking it as he sank slowly inside me.

His cock was thick and long, and it felt like I was split in half as he pressed into me, stretching, filling, the tight rings of muscle resistant until he thrust hard and deep, buried to his balls in my ass.

It was agony until he pulled back and slid back in, slower, scraping his cock over my prostate at the same time he spit into his right hand and took hold of my still-leaking shaft. He began a slow, sensual rhythm, in and out, thrusting, impaling, and the pinching sensation changed. I felt my balls tightening, drawing up, and the persistent edge of pain was finally replaced by sizzling heat as I let out a deep, guttural cry.

"Jackson," he whispered against my ear. "You're so hot and tight."

I trembled as he drove in and out of me, harder and deeper with every plunge, slipping an arm around my neck to hold me against him.

"My smell is on your skin."

The thought of him claiming me, cruelly, ravenously, of his hands on me, his mouth, his fangs sinking into my flesh, his shaft buried inside me, tore the orgasm from the base of my spine and dragged it though my body in a blinding release that had me writhing in violent ecstasy, screaming his name.

My muscles clutched around him, squeezing him tight, and he erupted inside me, pumping come deep into my clenching channel, his climax only

seconds behind my own.

We stood together, shuddering with the aftershocks, pressed together, my forehead leaning into the crook of his arm as he had it braced against the wall. As my brain cleared, the weight of what I had just done hit me on all levels.

"Should there have been a condom?" I asked breathlessly.

He shoved back away from me, and I gasped at the suddenness of the movement, the pain, the relief, all swirling together.

I was cold when he was gone, the warmth of his skin, his breath, sharply missed.

"A kyrie does not catch or transmit filthy human diseases, warder," he said disdainfully. "We are above such mediocrity."

I turned and looked at him over my shoulder as he scoffed at me. "You're a prick."

"Which you loved," he sneered, slapping my ass hard enough to leave a mark.

I faced the wall so he couldn't see my face, see that his words hurt and how true they were. To be manhandled and taken had been what I needed, what I deserved, what I craved, but I felt empty inside because nothing, none of it, had been anything but skin deep. For the sex to hold meaning, the connection had to be there. I had thought that maybe he would be the balm for my broken heart since he was evil just like me, and we could be a horror together. But as it turned out he didn't want anything to do with my heart, broken or otherwise.

I pulled up my underwear and jeans, working the buttons, buckling my belt, eyes on my task, not letting myself look anywhere else.

"Don't even think about turning me away," he warned me, contempt in his voice.

When I finally lifted my eyes, he was halfway to the entrance, the swagger evident in his stride. I could not remember ever hating anyone more.

VII

I WALKED, I talked, but there was nothing inside. I just went through the motions. I went to work, went on patrol, but it seemed surreal. Days passed like that, and the only thing that broke them up were Raphael's visits. I dreaded seeing him and was anxious to at the same time. I got so I knew his walk, his scent, the wicked gleam of his eyes, and the sound of his breathing.

The night before, I had gone to a bar to meet Ryan and Julian for drinks and had seen Frank. He was there with Rene, and they looked happy. When they were joined by a third man, Frank rose and gave him a kiss that made me uncomfortable even from where I was across the room. Rene shook the man's hand, and interestingly, the man took a seat beside Rene and not Frank.

"It's none of your business," Ryan said as he slid into the booth beside me.

"What's not?" Julian asked, leaning forward.

As Ryan explained, Julian turned to study both men before his eyes came back to me. I was surprised at the smile I was getting.

"You're hotter than both Rene and that other guy."

I appreciated the compliment.

"Phoebe says that you and she bonded over beets."

Caught off balance, I chuckled. "I think I might be in love with her."

He nodded. "She has that effect. Ry and I are meeting them for dinner after. Why don't you come?"

"Oh no, that's okay," I told him, knowing that Ryan would not want me there. Jael was right. He liked his life separate and—

"I would like that," my fellow warder said, turning his hazel eyes on me.
"Really."

So I went because I was truly invited, and when I followed them into the restaurant and we reached the table, Phoebe was up and out of her seat and around the table and in my arms before I could even say hello.

"Okay." Cash gave me a wide grin. "You're Jackson, right?"

I nodded as I hugged his wife. And she was still the only one hugging me lately. Because even though the kyrie and I were having sex, there were no kisses exchanged, and he never just held me. He pinned me against things—walls, tables, even bent me over my car in the garage. It was always desperate and jarring, but he had started carrying a small tube of Astroglide, which I appreciated. The thing was that I couldn't tell anyone what was going on between us, and that was hard. I needed to talk to someone, but I didn't know who.

"Oh honey." Phoebe sighed, stepping back, grabbing my hand and leading me away from the table.

"Phoebe?" Cash called out to his wife.

"Be right back," she promised, not stopping, making a beeline for the front door.

I was led outside, and once we were there, she turned and pounced on me.

"Spill. You look like shit," she commanded, arms crossed, looking up at me.

"I—"

"Just tell me," she prodded, unwrapping her arms, taking my hand. "God, Jackson, something about you—I feel like I've known you a million years."

I felt the same.

"And—oh."

"Oh?" I was confused.

"Oh-oh," she said, hand on her swollen abdomen. "I think this kid is ready to come out."

"Are you kidding?" I gasped.

Her face said no. I scooped her up and deposited her on the bench in front of the building. I got a quick pat, an apology for how heavy she was, and an order for me to get Cash now.

I kissed her forehead and turned to go.

Her fingers dug into my forearm.

"Honey?"

"You're a good man, Jackson. Believe it."

I tried to leave, but she tightened her grip.

"Really." She winced. "A very good man."

I nodded and charged back into the restaurant and up to the table.

"Did you ditch my wife?" Cash teased me.

"No, you gotta go; she's ready to have your kid."

His eyes went round, but I got why Phoebe loved him.

He was gorgeous, and that was apparent, but the way he rose, got his coat, and walked out the front door amazed me.

Ryan, Julian, and I were right behind him. When he reached his wife, we could all tell she was scared. But he got there, told her things, asked about the contractions and how far apart they were. He then turned, gave Julian his keys, and gave him directions about where Phoebe's packed hospital bag was in their house. Julian was to get it and meet them in delivery. He

then turned to Ryan and told him to go get his Jeep and drive them to the hospital. All his words were measured, his voice stayed level, and he held his wife in his arms the whole time. The man was a rock. I wanted one just like him. But I wanted Phoebe too.

I watched as Ryan kissed Julian before he left; I saw the smiles they exchanged, and my heart hurt. I saw the way Cash hugged his wife to him as they waited, heard her sigh of contentment as she nestled against him and was touched.

When Ryan returned, the Jeep there, double-parked in front of us, Phoebe yelled that she expected to see me at her bedside at some point. I told her I would. And then they were gone, and I was alone.

As I was walking home, Raphael jumped me, and it was rough and bruising, like stone scraping over concrete, and I was raw inside and out. But I allowed him to treat me like a piece of meat, like nothing, because it was what I deserved.

All that I deserved. I had not been able to go to the hospital; I didn't have it in me to face the love I would surely see.

In my office that night, I was getting ready to leave, and when I twisted left, I winced with pain. My whole body hurt. I was covered in scratches and bruises, and when the marks were being given, I could not have been made to care, but now that I was standing in front of my desk, packing my courier bag, the pain was another story.

A sudden scent made my stomach roll over. Turning, I saw him, sitting quietly like a spider in the corner of the room. I had not heard him come in. He stood, unfolding himself from the overstuffed chair, rising fluidly, rolling forward to his feet, and reached out and pushed gently on the door. It was heavy, so it slowly, inexorably, swung quietly closed. The tumbler in the lock clicked over at the same time. No one was getting in without me opening for them.

My mouth went dry. "You need to leave me alone."

His heavy-lidded eyes did not widen. Instead he simply watched me.

I forced a smile. "Seriously, Raph, don't you have people to hunt?"

A slow shake of his head and he came closer, reaching out as I turned to face him, hand on my shoulder that I realized was less human and more animal. The claws dug into my shoulder.

"What do you want?"

"There's only one thing I ever want from you, warder,"

he said as he pushed me back against my desk.

I put my hands down on either side of me, anchoring myself, as his hands went to work roughly, greedily, on my belt buckle. I let my head fall back, wondering how I would take him pounding into me again so soon, and craving it at the same time. I was broken inside, and he was filth. It made sense that we would come together this way.

The cool air of the room hit my cock a second before my jeans and briefs were yanked down and he engulfed the long hard length of me in his hot, wet mouth.

"Raphael!" I shouted hoarsely, shoving forward, burying myself in the back of his throat on instinct.

He sucked hard, his cheeks hollowed out; his tongue swirled and laved my rigid shaft, and watching his lips drag from base to head was a religious experience.

"You taste so good," he growled, smiling around my cock, and I saw the canines that could have cut into me if he wasn't careful.

But he was careful.

The pull, the suction, was fierce, and his hand holding my balls, the other holding my ass, all worked together to push me closer to climax. When I

buried my fingers in his hair, fisted and held tight, his moan of pleasure, the vibration on my throbbing shaft, was too much.

"I'm gonna come," I warned him.

He just sucked harder, faster, and I arched my back, plunging deep, emptying down the back of his throat.

My whole world was me coming, the orgasm that rolled through me, my shout of release. When he leaned back, licking me clean before he stood in front of me, I felt his hands on my hips as the claiming began. He was rough as he turned me, and I was bent down hard over my desk, mauled into place, manhandled.

My legs were parted as far as the corduroys around my ankles would allow. I heard the snap of the flip-top cap before the head of his massive dick nudged my entrance.

"You gotta be careful," I confessed. "I'm sore from last night."

I shouldn't have told him. He might have gone slowly if I didn't tell him. Instead, he spread my cheeks and drove inside me so hard, so fast, I saw stars. The pain, the burn, left me reeling for a moment before his cock, his amazing, thick, long cock, slid over my gland. The nerve endings ignited, and I was plunged into heat.

"Oh God," I moaned loudly.

"See," he said, impaling me, pushing deep. "Your body craves mine."

"I'll find someone who won't just wanna fuck me," I told him.

"Promises, promises," he said, one hand in my hair, yanking my head back sharply, the other splayed across my abdomen. "I am addicted to seeing you writhing around on the end of my dick."

I yanked my head free and slammed my hands down on the desk. "Just fuck me already, and then get the hell out of here!"

"As you wish," he said and impaled me in one brutal thrust.

His lube-slicked hand slid over my flaccid cock, but in his grip, it lengthened again, hardened. His talented fingers stroked until I was whimpering his name, hating myself and wanting him in equal measure. I matched his passion, his anger, his hunger, and when it was done, when the rage had alchemized into a flood of release, we were both left panting and sweating, heaving for breath.

The tears were of no consideration. This time I didn't give a damn.

"Get the fuck out and never come back," I ordered, pulling up my briefs and pants, tucking my T-shirt in, adjusting my sweater. No one would miss that I smelled like sex. Maybe I would stand in the rain and get it off before I got in a cab for home.

"You claimed me."

"What?"

"You claimed me. You marked me. You can't—"

"Fuckin' prove it," I snarled at him. "There ain't a mark on you."

His eyes were flat as he stared at me.

"Go away."

"No."

"Please."

His eyes narrowed. "You've found someone."

When would I have done that?

"Tell me," he ordered, his voice low and ominous as he moved forward, fisting his claws in my sweater.

"Why would you care?"

"Who is it?" he roared in my face.

I shoved him back, furious. "There's no one, but there will be. Fuck you and fuck this. I deserve better."

He was shaking hard and his jaw clenched as he stared at me.

"Get the hell—"

"Finally," he exhaled, and I saw his eyes fill, the tears there, but not falling.

I was dumbstruck. What the hell was going on?

"You know me," he said finally, sucking in his breath.

"You know the kind of man I am. Think about me, look at me, really look, and remember who I am."

I had no idea what he was talking about, but when his breath hitched, caught, it took every bit of strength in me not to grab him.

I saw the muscles in his jaw working; his eyes were dark and turbulent, swimming as he bit into his bottom lip with one long fang.

"Is there another?"

I shook my head.

"Then I will be now what you truly need and deserve."

I was so lost.

He took a breath, and then he was gone. The door bounced open a second later, like a strong breeze had blown through my office. There was no sign of anyone but me. I had no idea what to begin to think, but I knew what to do. I had to take a shower.

BY THE time I got home, I was soaked to the skin. I peeled off my clothes, dropping them around me on my way to the bathroom, and when I stepped into the shower, I felt different. Better. My life that had been turned upside down had suddenly righted itself, or else I had made the adjustment to walking on the ceiling. Whatever had occurred, I was glad. I felt like me for the first time in a very long time, like I was back to living in my own skin.

In the kitchen I was scrounging for food, not wanting to go back out into the monsoon, when something moved out of the corner of my eye. When I turned, I saw Raphael crouched like some living gargoyle outside my kitchen window, safe from the rain under the overhang of the loft above mine. It was a tiny space to be sitting on. I couldn't have done it, and I was impressed, as always, with his balance.

I moved fast, opened the window out, and looked up at him from where I stood leaning over my sink.

"Well?" he asked, holding up a large paper bag. "I have pho. Can I come in?"

But I couldn't fight with him anymore; I didn't have it in me. "I—"

"Don't you like pho?"

He could not have known that Vietnamese soup was one of my favorite things in the world. "Okay, yeah, come in."

Fluidly, like he was boneless, he slithered in from the cold, stepping from the ledge to the counter and to the floor in front of me. I closed it back up and then faced him. He was closer than I thought he was. The dark eyes were fixed on my mouth.

"What brings you back out in this weather, kyrie?"

He squinted at me. "If I stop calling you warder, will you stop calling me kyrie?"

"Yep."

"Done," he said, passing me the bag. "Will you eat with me?"

We didn't eat together. We did nothing together but fuck. "Sure."

"Good." He gave me a fleeting smile.

I watched him walk out of my kitchen, shedding clothes as he moved, like it was expected that I would pick up after him.

"Hello, not the maid."

He grunted as he dropped his parka, unzipped the heavy knit cardigan under it and pulled out of one sleeve and then the other, letting the sweater fall to the floor only to step over it. He was down to a pocket T-shirt and 501s by the time he flopped onto my couch. I put the bag down on the coffee table as he unzipped his ankle boots and let them clunk to the floor. His socks were peeled off and flung toward the fireplace that had wood in it ready to be burned.

"Dude."

He made a fist, and there was a sort of rise of heat in the room before I had flickering flames where there had been nothing moments before.

I smiled at him. "That's handy."

"That impressed you? Really? It's a parlor trick."

"Pretty neat trick."

His grin was wicked as he looked up at me.

I jogged back to the kitchen and got bowls and spoons, napkins, and two bottles of beer. I had liquor and milk in my refrigerator, and that was it. When I came back, he was lounging on the floor beside the coffee table.

"This was nice of you."

"I can be nice."

"Uh-huh."

"I can. Whatever you need," he said, leaning forward, elbows on the table. "I can be. You want bad boy with a chip on his shoulder, I can be him. You want poetry and flowers, I can be that guy too. You ask and you shall receive."

I nodded as I pulled the huge Styrofoam container of soup out of the bag. The broth smelled amazing, and as I unpacked all the items that were supposed to be added in—

the grilled chicken, bean sprouts, mint, rice vermicelli, long-stemmed mushrooms, and green onions—he watched me.

"Tell me what you want in yours," I asked, passing him a beer.

"Just make it the same as yours."

Once I was done, we settled down to eat. It was good, and I was starving, and so, apparently, was he. We ate in silence until we both started slowing down.

"I like the music," he told me when he was finished, leaning back, arms braced behind him on the area rug.

"I always have something on; I can't stand a quiet house."

"Why not?"

"I dunno." I shrugged. "Feels weird, lonely."

"And that's not you."

"That is me. Why the hell do you think I need the music on to chase it away?"

He chuckled. "This singer, she sounds sad."

"It's jazz. They all sound like that."

He smiled at me, stretching his leg, sliding his foot along the side of my thigh. Even through my sweats, I could feel how icy his skin was.

"I should get you some socks," I told him, getting up.

"No, just sit on the couch with me. I wanna talk to you."

"Let me clean this up. Make yourself comfortable."

"I can help."

"You brought dinner. That was enough help."

"Nice to not have to do everything, huh?"

I didn't answer, instead concentrating on the task at hand.

Once all traces of dinner were gone, I brought him another beer, turned off all the lights except for the low ones in the living room, and took a seat on the opposite end of the couch from him. He immediately slid both feet under my right thigh.

"Christ, you're frozen." I smiled over at him, putting my hand on his calf, gripping tight.

He hissed out a breath and let his head fall back on the throw pillow behind him. "That feels so good."

I put my beer on the floor beside the couch and turned and slid each of my hands up under the cuffs of his jeans.

His legs were toned and strong, and he moaned out his pleasure as I kneaded the rigid muscles.

"I killed Saudrian," he said softly.

My eyes flicked to his. "What?"

"You heard me."

I went still sitting there, staring at him. "When?"

"Last night."

"You didn't tell me."

"We haven't been speaking."

And we hadn't. The sum of our communication had been me bottoming for him.

"Are you hurt?"

"No." He chuckled. "Do I look hurt?"

But around his eyes, he did. "Yeah, kinda."

His brows furrowed as he lifted his legs, pulling them free of my grip only to slide them over my right leg, down into my lap, and shove under my left thigh. "It was harder than I thought it was going to be, and his mate—a dark witch—she got away."

I was listening, but I was also watching, and the way he was fidgeting, his hands restless, picking at the couch cushion, made me wonder what he wanted. "Are you scared of her?"

"Not of a witch," he said, his eyes darting all over like he was getting ready to run.

"You wanna get in my lap?" I asked him.

He didn't answer; he just moved. He rolled forward, fast, like he uncoiled, and shifted over, straddling my thighs, his long legs folded on either side of my hips as he shoved his groin into my abdomen.

My head tipped back, and I looked up into his eyes. "Are you hurt?"

He shook his head. "Are you?"

"From what, a little rough sex?"

He cleared his throat. "It was necessary."

"It wasn't necessary. It's your kink, and you loved it, and you would have gone on loving it if I would have—"

"No." He caught his breath, his fingers lifting, reaching, sliding over my chin to my jaw until he had my face captured in his hands and was staring down into my face.

I took hold of his wrists, realizing suddenly that the eyes that I had found so ferocious and feral were now soft and simmering with need.

"Jackson." He whimpered.

I lifted and he bent and took absolute possession of my lips. The whine that came out of him was heartbreak, and he kissed me like it was the only thing in the world he wanted to do. All the hunger and need and craving was still there, but now it was tempered with a new, shivering anticipation that I felt tumble through me.

He wasn't pawing at me, pulling, or trying to rip off my clothes; he was instead intent only on my mouth, licking, sucking, his tongue pressing against mine, one kiss flowing to the next and the next, creating a rising pool of need in me.

I'd had no idea he would taste so good.

When I finally pulled back, breaking the kiss, he leaned forward to recapture my mouth.

"I wanna talk to you."

"Why?" He was breathless, hands on my shoulders, as he ground his mouth back down over mine, kissing me deep.

His moan a second later was very sexy.

My hands slid the length of his arms, over bulging biceps and triceps to muscular shoulders, tracing his deltoids, marveling at the definition. The man was toned and beautiful, his frame strong and powerful, and having him in my lap was pure pleasure. My body was definitely ready to play.

He slid his wet, swollen lips from mine and looked down at me with heavy-lidded eyes.

"You're so pretty, Raph." I smiled at him.

He lifted his arms, and I pulled the T-shirt up over his head, revealing a broad, carved chest, dark brown pierced nipples, a washboard stomach, and sexy lines on each side of his stomach that I traced with my fingers.

He jolted under my touch.

"You just expect to come over here and get laid?" I asked, leaning forward without even thinking about it, pressing my lips to his hot bronze skin.

"Oh Jackson, please." His breath caught as he buried his hands in my hair.

I pushed up, and he made the most amazing noise at the same time he pressed his crease down over the hard bulge in my sweats.

"Wait." I looked up at him, confused. "You're a top."

He shook his head. "I'm whatever I want, just like you, so could you... please?"

I let out a deep breath as I saw how red-rimmed his eyes were, how hard he was working to hold himself together, and how the slight tremble was giving him away.

"Would you come get in my bed?"

He fell forward, arms wrapped around my neck, face buried down in my shoulder, and just breathed.

I felt the shudder run through him, felt him surrender, and felt the wall collapse. The faith he had to have, his belief that in this vulnerable state I would not attack him—I was humbled.

With the taste of him in my mouth, the warmth of his touch on my skin, and the deep sound of his exhale, I grabbed him tight, one hand on the back of his head, the other on the small of his back, anchoring him to me.

"Don't let me go." He spoke the words onto my skin.

"Just keep me."

Amazing.

If there was anyone more stupid than me, I had no idea who that could be. The man in my arms had been right in front of me for months, waiting, watching, mine for the taking, and I had been crying over a man who didn't want me anymore. He had taken chances for me, killed for me, stood between me and death, and still I had persisted in not seeing him. And then when he had me, just a part of me that I would give him, because I would not recognize goodness in myself, he had met me, blow for blow, with only the cruelty and violence that I thought I deserved. But truly, in his deepest, most secret heart, the man wanted to be loved and cherished and to simply belong to me.

"I'm an idiot," I told him.

"Yes," he said, pressing even closer to me, his legs tightening.

I smoothed my hands slowly over his thighs because I really wanted to shove them down the back of his pants and grab his ass hard. It was a raw need that I couldn't shake.

"Get up," I ordered him, my voice deep, commanding.

His eyes narrowed, suddenly heavy-lidded, as he clasped his hands above his head, stretching his rippling muscles and smooth bronze skin for me just in case I was stupid enough to not see him.

"I get it, asshole," I growled at him. "You're a god, and I'm a clueless mortal."

"Good," he breathed out, rising up off of me in a seamless, fluid motion.

I rose beside him, leaned in, kissed his cheek, and was rewarded with a smile that would melt butter. "Just c'mere."

When I reached for his hand, he was there to take mine and hold tight. Halfway down the hall, he shoved me into the wall, ground up against me, and pressed his groin to the inside of my thigh. His hands went to my waist, burrowing up under my T-shirt.

"God, your skin is so hot," he groaned, forcing my head back against the wall, his lips on my throat.

His mouth sealed to my skin felt so much better than good. I couldn't help jolting under him.

"You like me all over you."

There was no denying it, and as his hands moved higher, circling my pebbling nipples before he pinched them, a hard throb of desire washed through me.

"Jackson," he murmured.

I bent and kissed him, the deep whimper from the back of his throat making me smile against his lips. I put my hands on his face, holding him, and devoured his mouth. My tongue tangled with his, sliding over his, sucking, licking, and pushing, seeking dominance.

Walking him backward, I eased him through the doorway of my bedroom and then tore my mouth from his at the same time I tackled him, driving him down under me onto my bed.

My bed.

I had never thought I would get the man in my bed. I never thought I would want him there.

"What was that?" He was laughing at me, and the sound was deep and husky.

I loved the deep lines around his eyes, the smile that lit his face, and the way his hands slid up my thighs. He enjoyed touching me, just the simple act, and I had missed that as well.

"You're mine," I growled, and the way his eyes fluttered shut, the way he savored the declaration, was another epiphany.

I reached for his belt buckle, and wonder of wonders, the man was ticklish.

"Big, bad-ass demon tracker," I muttered as he giggled, rolling off the bed so I had more leverage to yank off his jeans and the boxers underneath. They had blue stripes.

"Cute," I told him.

He flipped me off but gasped in the middle of his show of bravado as I dropped to my knees beside the bed and took the enormous uncut penis that had been inside me so many times down the back of my throat.

He had no idea what he'd been missing. I gave head like a rock star.

"Jackson!"

Oh yes.

"Jacks... baby," he groaned, his hands in my hair. "Your beard feels amazing."

Yet another sensation he had been missing out on.

The mantra of my name began.

I wrapped one hand under my mouth; the other went to his balls as I coated him, sucked, smiling around his leaking shaft, hearing his breath catch in his chest. I made the suction strong, let him feel my tongue swirling over the head, down the side and up, my lips sliding fast and fierce. When I raised my eyes to his, I saw his mouth open in a frozen gasp, saw the bliss on his face and how clouded with passion his eyes were. I nearly came right there.

"Want you inside," he begged me, hand in my hair, trying to get me to stop, tugging. "Need you inside. I claimed you. Please."

I pointed to the drawer in the nightstand at the same time I let his saliva-coated shaft slip from between my lips.

He rolled over fast, and it was a treat to watch his perfect ass lifted in the air as he crawled across my bed.

Finding the bottle, he scrambled back to me, handing it over before turning and getting into position on his hands and knees.

"Not a chance."

He looked over his shoulder at me, and when he spoke, his voice was hoarse and full of sand. "Please, baby."

"Come here."

He didn't understand and then suddenly did.

"Oh yes." I grinned at him, noting the surprised expression. "You will look at me when we do this, the whole time. Do you understand?"

He nodded, but he was overwhelmed, and it was there on his face, in his eyes.

"Put your legs on my arms."

He slid his icy feet up my chest and then scooted forward, his knees in the crooks of both elbows as I opened the bottle with a quick snap and dribbled

cold, slippery gel into my palms. I warmed it in my hands and then fisted his rock-hard shaft that was straining for me.

"Feel good?" I asked as he arched up off the bed.

"Just turn me over and fuck me," he pleaded.

"Look at me!"

His eyes flew open and locked with mine as I slid a finger deep inside him. The rapture on his face, the wince at the same time, was captivating. In seconds he was pushing down on my finger, begging for another. I complied fast, stroking his cock at the same time, scissoring my fingers inside him, letting him get used to the intrusion.

When he was squirming under me, trying to increase the pressure, I slid out of him, changing my angle, hands on the firm, round ass, spreading him, aligning my cock with his fluttering hole.

He lifted, inviting me, and I slid into him easily, burying myself to the hilt in his tight, quivering heat.

His back bowed, he raked claws through the sheets, and I smiled because my bedding was shredded. His eyes glowed bright topaz, inhuman, and when I saw the gaze full of me, only me, I eased out and plunged back down into him as hard as I could.

"Jackson, please... please."

The panting, the growling whimper, and the muscles in his ass squeezing me so tight all worked together to drive me right out of my mind. I grabbed hold of his hips and hammered into him, pressing forward, spreading his legs apart.

I felt my body tighten, and then the orgasm surged through me, powerful and blinding, and there was not the quick flash of climax but the euphoria I got when it meant something, when it was a joining, when it was more than just sex and mutual satisfaction and instead love.

Love.

There was no way.

But when I filled his channel, when I was left sated and empty, he pulled me down on top of him, over his warm body, and wrapped arms and legs around me. He didn't let me pull out; he told me I could stay inside of him forever.

"Oh yeah," I said, my voice a low rumble in my chest.

"You sure?"

"Very," he promised, and I heard his complete and undeniable need.

I stayed where I was.

VIII

I COULD tell when I walked in that Ryan was surprised to see me. The look got even funnier a minute later when Raphael walked in behind me. His face went completely blank. Julian's reception had been warmer, as always, and after he hugged me, he had gone ahead and hugged Raphael.

"What're you guys drinking?" the hearth of my fellow warder asked us.

It was Phoebe's idea. It was just an open house. Nothing important, nothing formal, just an "*everyone come on by when you can drop by and say hello and see the new baby*"

party. Her voice on the phone had been upbeat, casual, but there was an underlying thread in her tone. I knew mom guilt when I heard it, still missed my own, so when she said it was up to me, show up or not, I heard the order clear as day.

My ass had better be there.

I figured I would multitask, unveil the new guy in my life and see the baby at the same time. I was looking for her in the house, and when I finally saw her, I was surprised at how wrung out she looked. She was still beautiful, but her radiance had dulled, her glow faded. And I understood, new baby and all, but after observing for a few minutes, I realized it was even more. The cherub from heaven, Gabriella, Gaby, immediately started wailing if anyone but her mother had her. As a result, Phoebe was holding her while she tried to eat and talk and visit with friends and family.

She had been so happy to see me, had chided me for not coming to the hospital, but understood, or thought she did, when she saw Raphael.

"That is one beautiful man you have there," she told me when I took a seat beside her on the couch as she was trying to burp her daughter.

"Why did you go in the other room?" I asked her.

"When?"

"Just a little while ago."

She thought a minute. "I was breast-feeding, you perv."

She giggled, reaching out to run a hand over my cheek. "And you should get rid of this beard of yours and cut your hair."

What are you hiding from?"

I ran the backs of my knuckles up the side of my face over the close-cropped hair. "A man with a beard and mustache is trustworthy; a man with a goatee is scary."

"And who told you this?"

"I think I read it on the Internet."

"Uh-huh." She wasn't listening, staring at Raphael as he crossed the room to us instead. "Your man is making Ryan really twitchy."

"I know."

"You're enjoying it."

"Just a little."

"But why?"

"Why do I enjoy annoying Ryan?"

"No, I get that. Why does Raphael freak him out?"

"It's because he's a kyrie."

"A what?"

"Demonic bounty hunter," I told her.

"Just like you."

"I don't hunt, warders don't, we protect and I'm human and he's not."

"Really." Her face lit up.

She watched way, way too much TV.

When Raphael sat down beside me, his hand went immediately to my knee.

"Aww." Phoebe sighed, and then her eyes popped open.

"Crap."

"Crap what?"

"Crap, I'm supposed to call my sister and give her directions to the sushi place. She's picking up sashimi and the edamame for—"

"Eda-what?" I asked her.

"Soybeans," Raphael educated me.

Oh. It was food. "We can go grab it for you," I offered.

"No," she said, getting up and presenting her daughter to me. "I know she's fussing, but just hold on to her until—"

"No no no," I told her. "Just—"

"I'll hold her," Raphael said confidently, rising up out of the seat and taking the squirming infant like he did it every day of his life. He put the blanket over his shoulder and then gently tucked the baby against it, patting her back softly.

I was stunned.

Phoebe was stunned.

Gaby was not stunned. She burped, scrunched up her face, blew out a tiny baby fart, yawned, stretched, and fell asleep.

"Holy crap," Phoebe said flatly.

"No poop, just gas," Raphael corrected her.

"No, I mean—holy crap, she's not screaming."

"Oh." He was unimpressed. "I didn't think babies cried if you held 'em."

She scoffed.

We drew spectators.

Cash was there, and so were Ryan and Julian, and moments later, Phoebe's mother, Lila. She volunteered to put Gabriella down in her crib and went to take her before anyone could say a word. The second she put her hands on the infant, the little girl squawked.

Grandma let go like Gabriella was the hot potato in the kid's game.

Cash tried with the same result.

All eyes in the small group were on Raphael.

"What?"

"You and the baby." I grinned up at him from where I was still sitting on the couch.

"C'mon, there's nothing safer than a bounty hunter that can kill demons," he told me. "And she must know. Babies know who to trust."

It was so sweet what he said, so gentle and—

"What did he say?" Phoebe's mother asked.

Crap.

"What'd I say?" The man was at a complete loss.

I bumped his knee with my foot. "I can't take you anywhere."

His smile, because I had touched him, was brilliant, and Phoebe finally saw the fangs. "Awesome," she breathed out.

"He has your child," Cash reminded his wife.

"And what's he gonna do, eat her?"

Ryan looked at her in complete astonishment.

"You won't, will you?" Phoebe asked Raphael.

"Kyries don't eat babies, just full-grown men."

I bumped him again, even gentler the second time.

"What?" He chuckled, moving closer so he could stand between my knees.

"What did he say?" Phoebe's mother asked again.

"So this is, what, permanent now?" Ryan asked.

"Do warders drain kyries?" Julian wanted to know, and I got the feeling the thought had just occurred to him.

"No," Raphael told him, "only humans," before turning back to look down at me. "Answer him."

"What?"

"Answer the warder."

I looked back at Ryan. "Yeah, we're gonna date, see how it goes."

"How do you date a kyrie?"

I coughed. "He moves in."

"Oooh, he moved in already?" Phoebe purred. "That's so hot."

"I thought he said demonic something," Gaby's grandmother asked again.

"Mom, go get a drink," Cash suggested to his mother-in-law, hitting Raphael in the arm hard as soon as the older woman turned away.

"What the fuck was that for?"

"Don't swear in front of the baby," Phoebe cautioned him.

"She's two weeks old." Cash defended my... boyfriend?

"How does she know, Phoebe?"

I still wasn't really sure what Raphael and I were. Fuck buddies? Friends with benefits? He had been living in my house and sleeping in my bed for the past three days. The truth was that if I wanted to see him I had to add a line on my phone plan and move him in permanently. The man had a place he slept, not a home, just a room, he told me, in another dimension. It did not have electricity. It did not, in fact, even have running water. In my world, he stayed in seedy motels that he paid for by the night. If I wanted to see him, if I wanted to meet him for dinner and drinks, he had to live with me. He had no home beyond the one I would, or would not, decide to provide for him because he did not technically exist. He didn't have a credit rating or a social security number or a birth certificate. He could not even rent anything. If I wanted him around, he had to move in. He had asked to stay, and I had told him he could. Beyond that, there was nothing more substantial or concrete.

Every day I liked that arrangement less.

I had told him that I wanted him to go wherever he needed to, collect his things, and bring them back.

"Why?"

"I think that would be obvious."

"You want me to bring my treasures to your home?"

"Yes."

"Even as you have claimed me, even if you make a home for me, you still won't own me," he had said, leaning forward, kissing a trail up the side of my neck to my ear.

"No?" I shivered as he had sucked my lobe into his hot mouth.

"No, I do as I like. I return only if I want to."

"Do you want to?"

"Oh yes," he said, his hands sliding over my hips, drawing me forward. "I want nothing more."

"Jacks?"

My head snapped up to Ryan, and I realized they were all looking down at me because my mind had been drifting and I had been all the way across town, back in bed. "Sorry."

"Don't say that shit in front of Phoebe's mother," Cash warned Raphael.

"Cash Vega!"

"What did—"

"You're swearing in front of the baby," I told him, gesturing at Gaby, who took that moment to squeak.

We all watched as Raphael took her off his shoulder and cradled her in his arms. Her eyes blinked open, she looked up at him, gave him the face that was either gas or a smile, and promptly fell back to sleep.

"She really likes you," Julian said.

"I'm likable," Raphael told him.

I had to agree.

I HAD called Jael while he was in Scotland and given him my weird news, so I was not surprised when I was summoned, along with the new man in my life, to his home when he got back from his trip. My phone had beeped at me as we were leaving Cash and Phoebe's, and Ryan had overheard me talking to Raphael.

"Julian and I will come along," he said and left no room for argument. "I'll drive."

"Is he gonna test me or try and kill me?" Raphael asked worriedly from the backseat of Ryan's Jeep. "Should we make a stop at home so I can get my sword?"

"No," I soothed him, taking his hand. "It'll be fine."

He did not look convinced but hid his concern with a topic change. "What's with this crappy Jeep, man?" he asked Ryan. "You should get it painted."

"Yes, he should," Julian agreed. "I think cherry red."

"Or darker, like blood." Raphael's eyes glittered.

"You can take the demon out of hell..." Ryan began before Julian pinched him, hard.

"Owww, shit."

I flicked the back of his ear. "He's not a demon."

"For crissakes, I'm driving!"

But it made Raphael smile, and I was glad.

When we reached Jael's home, his mansion in Sausalito that outside looked normal but inside like some medieval Celtic castle, I was surprised to find

Marcus, Leith, and Malic there as well. Jael seemed surprised to see Ryan.

"I was just about to call you."

"Now you don't have to."

He opened his mouth to say something.

"I think you should have all the others go and get their hearths as well, and you should bring your lady in so we can all meet her."

I had never seen Jael so flummoxed and never, ever, heard anyone give him orders.

"You see," I told my sentinel under my breath, tipping my head at Ryan, "you're wrong, you know. The next sentinel of San Francisco won't be me. It'll be Ryan Dean."

And I saw him realize that even though Ryan didn't particularly enjoy being a warder, he understood duty and pride.

I pulled Raphael back into a corner as Malic, Marcus, and Leith all got on their cell phones to call their mates.

"I think your friend Ryan just sort of cleared a path for me when he acted like it was nothing that I was here," he said, reaching up to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear.

"I think so too. I'll have to thank him."

"You do that."

Half an hour later everyone was assembled—Joe, Marcus's hearth, still complaining about the smell of the cab he'd just been in, and Simon agreeing, as they'd shared it, that it had smelled like the bathroom at the BART station downtown.

"What?" he snapped, aware that everyone was looking at him even though he couldn't see them. "It did."

"It did," Simon agreed, looking crisp and polished and handsome in his three-piece suit. His dark hair and charcoal-gray eyes were a striking contrast, and I understood, as always, why he had caught Leith's eye to begin with. Watching the long-haired blond man grab the businessman's hand made me smile.

There was another knock on the door, and when Ian, Jael's butler, went to get it, Dylan Shaw, Malic's hearth, came breezing through.

He smiled big, gave Ian a pat on the arm that the older man rolled his eyes over—it was not appropriate, after all—

and then saw me and Raphael. Malic didn't even have a chance to call him before he darted across the room, bounding to a stop in front of us.

"Hey." He smiled wide, holding out his hand for the kyrie. "I missed you."

And only Dylan could have said it and made it sound so genuine. He always meant absolutely everything he said. I had no idea the amount of energy it must have taken to live that way, so absolutely in the present all the time.

Raphael took Dylan's hand, and the young man grabbed him, hugging him, as Malic was suddenly there.

"Oh hey." Dylan's smile got bigger, out of control, brimming with love for the surly warder before he leaped at him and Malic had to catch him in his arms.

"Fuck," Malic growled, turning his neck, which Dylan had both his arms wrapped around, to Jael as he entered the room with a very elegant-looking woman on his arm.

"Nice first impression, asshole," Ryan grunted.

"Me?"

"Gentlemen." Jael's voice boomed through the room. "I want you to meet Deidre Macauley."

They all smiled and waved at her. I left Raphael and walked over to her and lifted my arms for the hug.

She seemed surprised but unwound her arm from his and stepped into me. I hugged her gently, gave her the extra squeeze at the end, and then let her go as I told her how glad I was that she was there and hoped she had planned on a nice long visit.

The look I got was interest and appreciation and warmth all rolled up together. "Jael, you never told me your warders were so charming."

"I had no idea they were," he answered honestly.

She nodded slowly, studying me. "How old were you when you were called?"

"Sixteen," I told her.

All warders were orphans, alone in the world, which was the reason a hearth was absolutely vital. There had to be a grounding presence in the life of a warder or they slowly went mad. Everyone wanted to be loved; to a warder it was life and death.

"I'm so sorry," she said, her hand lifting to my face, her own brows furrowing.

"It's all right," I soothed her, coming back to the present, having been lost in my own thoughts for a minute. "But I think that's another one of the many reasons it would be nice if you were here; then we'd have a family again."

She gasped, getting it, the fact that if Jael was our surrogate father, then if she was there and with him, that made her the mom in the equation.

From the look on her face, the idea held great appeal.

"Oh Jaka," Jael said, reaching out to pat the same cheek her hand had just vacated. "I should have you move in to make sure she stays."

"Jael," she whispered. "I had no idea that you—"

"I want you here," he said, turning to look down at her from his towering height.

She was overwhelmed, in a good way, but overwhelmed nevertheless.

"Is this why we were called over here?" Leith interrupted.

I took that opportunity to whisper again how glad I was to meet her before returning to Raphael. The second I reached him, he took my hand. It was nice.

"I mean, if it was, great, let's all sit down and have a drink and talk, but if it's not, can we get to it? 'Cause Malic and I have to patrol later."

"No." Jael cleared his throat. "I wanted you all over here to discuss the concerns of having a kyrie among us."

Raphael's hand clenched mine, but I leaned closer, shoulder to shoulder with him, and felt his tension ease.

"Why?" Julian asked my sentinel.

"Because you all have the right to know who or what—"

"No we don't." Leith cut him off. "And this is crap. All those in favor of the kyrie staying with Jackson say aye.

Aye."

"We're voting on that?" Julian was surprised.

"I didn't know we were voting?" Joe chimed in, his smile huge.

"Oh yeah." Dylan's face lit up. "I vote yes!"

"Oh me too," Joe agreed. "I always want new people in my circle. Bring on the kyrie."

"Joe," Marcus began, "we aren't vot—"

"But isn't that why we're here?" Simon interrupted. "It is, isn't it?"

"Not to vote," Jael began. "To understand what having a supernatural creature with us entails and how—"

"But if we vote, we could just leave," Malic said bluntly.

"Right?"

"Right," Leith agreed.

"Okay, so I vote yes," Simon announced, turning to look at Raphael. As he did, I noticed that the dark charcoal-gray eyes had warmed to quicksilver. "Raphael saved Malic and me, Leith, and a lot of other really nice people, and Jackson too." He turned his head to look at me. "Didn't he?"

"Yes, he did," I told him.

"Well, then," he said like it was a done deal.

"So then why are we voting if he's a good guy?" Julian was confused.

"I've been here five years," Joe chimed in. "How these people do anything is beyond me."

"Why are you voting, Jael?"

We all turned to look at Deidre, who did not look pleased at what was transpiring.

I noticed her hair, how dark brown it was, and the auburn highlights in it that caught the light. Her blue eyes were clear and deep, and the lashes that framed them were thick and long. I liked her face, the warmth in her eyes, and the resolute set of her jaw.

"A warder chooses his own hearth. The sentinel has no say," she told him, and I was reminded then that she herself was a sentinel, which meant she had warders of her own to care for and protect and guide. "A warder earns

the right to choose his or her own path." Her brows furrowed thoughtfully. "You don't try and choose mates for your charges, do you?"

He looked cornered.

She was suddenly wary, and I could tell it was a deal breaker for her. "All warders have free will, Jael. You know that."

"I—"

"Jael?" She looked very concerned, concerned like maybe he better say something really fast or she would be taking the next flight back to Edinburgh.

"Hold on," he soothed her.

Blue eyes flashed. "It's unheard of for a sentinel to ever—"

"No no no," he told her, hands up, trying to settle her down, and all of us, the whole room, at the same time. "I merely, because he's a kyrie, wanted us to all be on the same page going for—"

"A kyrie is just like a warder," she told him. "One hunts and one protects. It's practically the same thing."

"But kyries are born in purgatory."

"So was I. It's just called Ferguslie Park."

"Which is where?" Julian asked.

"In Scotland. That's where she's from."

"How was I supposed to know that?"

"Doesn't Ryan tell you anything?"

He turned to look at Ryan, who in turn flipped me off.

"Who are we talking about?" Deidre snapped at Jael.

"Which of your warders is taking up with a kyrie?"

"That'd be me." I waved at her.

"Oh, well." Her eyes slid over Raphael. "What's the problem?"

Jael cleared his throat. "Jaka's judgment has been in question lately. His old hearth was attacking demons—"

"Frank fought demons?" Joe scoffed. "With what? His calculator?"

"With the branding touch," Leith informed him.

"We have superpowers too?" Dylan sounded excited.

"Nobody told me. Malic, how come you didn't tell me?"

"I didn't," Malic began. "You shouldn't," he growled, before his head swiveled to Leith. "You fuck!"

"Gentlemen!" Deidre yelled, but her smile crept in there.

"Wow. Okay, Jael, the actions of Jaka's former hearth can in no way be attributed to him any more than one person leaving another causes the first one to jump off a bridge.

Everyone is responsible for their own actions. If the warder chooses a hearth too unstable to understand the importance of being the omphalos, the center of their world, normally you can tell right away. It sounds like this Frank is in love with the idea of warding, not, and I'm sorry, Jaka, with the warder himself."

"Exactly," I told her.

"Well, then the judgment to have loved the hearth initially is not faulty, simply, in hindsight, regrettable."

"But I don't regret it," I told her. "How could I?"

"Because you learned something." She smiled at me.

"Yes."

"Oh I like her." Joe grinned wide. "Can she stay, and Jael can go back to—where?"

"Scotland," I told him.

"Yeah, Jael's got the groovy name. He'd fit right in there."

"Joseph Alan Locke!" Marcus scolded him.

"What? I'm just saying."

"You need a ball gag."

"Don't I have one already?"

"Kinky." Julian chuckled, arching an eyebrow for his own boyfriend's benefit.

I saw the muscles in Ryan's jaw flex, heard the sharp exhale of breath. Julian had a very carnal effect on him that was obvious.

"Quiet!" Jael barked out before sighing deeply. "My only concern was due to Jaka's state of mind lately."

"I'm fine," I assured him.

"He's fine," Malic growled, shoving Dylan off him before the smaller man could get his hands up under the sweater he was wearing. Malic's heart tended to be all hands where his warder was concerned.

"He does look better," Ryan agreed before squinting at me, "although the beard and the mustache have to go."

"I think the beard's hot." Simon winked at me.

"Yeah, me too," Dylan chorused.

"Come over here and lemme touch the beard, baby," Joe called over to me.

I laughed because of the look on Marcus's face.

"Really?" He scolded his mate.

Jael growled. "Kyries can become true demons, so I wanted everyone to be aware of—"

"But only the unclaimed ones," Dylan said brightly, and his voice that always sounded good, husky and low, caught everyone's attention. "Isn't that right? That's what Malic said. As long as the kyrie is claimed, then they never go—

what's the word?"

"Evil?" Simon offered.

"Oh-oh, rogue," Joe said dramatically, drawing out the word.

"Demony?" Julian threw in.

"That's not a word." Dylan laughed at him.

"Why isn't rogue good?" Joe sounded insulted.

"It's good, love," Marcus assured him.

"You're patronizing me—patronizing the blind guy."

Malic couldn't stifle his snort of laughter. "You just called yourself the blind guy."

"Why is that funny?"

It snowballed from there. Jael looked over at me, and I waggled my eyebrows at him.

"I guess I shouldn't have worried," Raphael said beside me.

I turned to look at him.

"It's like a damn frat house around here. How do you people inspire any fear at all?"

"Because when we're out there doing our thing, we're sort of lethal."

"Uh-huh."

But we were. We were scary if you were the bad guy. I let out a quick breath. "Now we can just concentrate on figuring out what we're gonna do without worrying about them."

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"Giving this a shot."

"My pleasure."

"Raphael."

The room went silent as Deidre stepped in front of us.

"Are you the kyrie that killed the demon lord Saudrian?"

He cleared his throat. "I am."

"That was well done." She nodded, and I saw her eyes fill suddenly as she reached up to put a hand on his cheek.

"Saudrian, he took my warder Glenna from me, and because of that, her hearth David, later, as well."

"He couldn't make it without her, huh?"

"Sometimes the bond is too deep." She smiled through her tears.

Raphael's hand that was still in mine squeezed tightly.

"I get that."

She took a breath. "And his mate, the blood witch Moira. Does she live?"

"Yeah, I couldn't get to her in time before I would've changed, and the portal.... I just, I didn't want to get stuck and not be able to get back to—to see if maybe...." He stopped suddenly and shrugged.

"To see if you could claim a warder for your own."

He lifted my hand, kissed the back of it, but never stopped looking at her.

"Yes."

"Well, you have my protection, the protection of a sentinel of the Labarum, as well as all my warders. They will be thrilled to know who severed the head of Saudrian."

"Thank you."

"No, dear, thank you," she breathed out. "But you must be careful. Moira is a formidable enemy. I have faced her myself many times. She will try and break you before she comes for the kill." She pointed at me. "You need to be mindful of your warder."

I saw the truth of her statement hit Raphael, and instantly he tried to pull his hand free.

He was going to run. He was going to go back to my loft, grab his sword, and go find Moira. He would kill her, or she would kill him, but while he was hunting her, in the time it took to locate her, he would stay away from me, put distance between us so the witch would not come after me and I would be safe.

I held on and, with my other hand, grabbed hold of his jacket. "Don't be stupid. She knows who I am. Whether you're with me or not, she's coming, and if you're with me, you can protect me. So stay right here. Don't run. You're done running."

He nodded fast, unsure, and I pulled my hand free and grabbed him. I hugged him tight, pressed against him, head down in his shoulder. I kissed behind his ear, in the spot I had found the day before that made his knees weak.

"Jackson." He sighed out my name.

"And besides," I told him, whispering, "you've got help taking care of me."

"Yes, I do."

He wasn't alone anymore.

IX

IT WAS wet and cold, and I wanted to be home cooking, but instead I was outside in the rain because Rene Favreau had come to my office. I had looked up and found him, and then Cielo was there too, not looking happy, looking really annoyed, and right before I opened my mouth to ask Rene why the hell he was in my office, he started talking.

Frank had changed so dramatically, was not himself; he was worried that maybe the man had endured some sort of nervous breakdown. I needed to check on him. Would I please just check on him? And I didn't understand why he couldn't just do it himself until he explained that he and Frank, just like Frank and I, had broken up. Rene was no longer in his life either. Funny.

So against my better judgment and over Cielo's very loud objections, I went to check on Frank Sullivan for perhaps the last time. He had moved, again, but I found people all the time, so it wasn't hard to track him down. The old warehouse, now converted lofts, was in an up-and-coming yuppie neighborhood in the city. As I stood in an alley, looking across the street at his window, I was trying to figure out the best way to get a look at him without him seeing me.

"What're you doing?"

I smiled but didn't look over my shoulder at him. "I thought you were hunting that fox demon for Mr. Sugitani."

"Found it," he grumbled, walking around in front of me.

He smiled when he saw my grin. He couldn't stop himself, and the fact that he couldn't, that his reaction to me was automatic, thrilled me. "Now tell me what the hell you're doing here when you're supposed to be home cooking my dinner."

We had developed a routine in little over a month and a half, and even though neither of us had broached the subject of permanency, it was starting to feel like that anyway.

"I gotta check on Frank."

His eyes went flat, and when he spoke, his voice ran cold. "Why?"

"Rene thinks he might be possessed."

It was not what he was expecting, and the slow squint told me as much. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Okay, see, Rene came to the office today. You remember Rene—you were there with me when I saw them the first time."

"Yes, I was there with you."

"Yeah, so today Rene pops in and tells me that he and Frank are over but that he's worried that there's something really wrong with him. Well, I know that Frank's not psychotic, but maybe, just maybe, something did follow him home, and now he's possessed."

"So you're here to check."

"I'm here to check."

"But nothing else?"

I put a hand on his chest. "Nothing else." I shivered.

He moved closer, hands on my face. "You're gonna catch pneumonia."

"No." I sneezed suddenly, having started feeling like crap earlier. My bones were achy, and I was a little stuffed up. "I'll be fine."

"How is it that human beings can fly to the moon but not figure out how to kill a virus?"

"I don't know." I coughed. "Now go home and start dinner, and I'll be right there as soon as I—"

"Shut up. I'll check on him," he said, flipping up the collar on my peacoat, taking off his own scarf and wrapping it around my neck. He pulled me back down the street, under an awning, and out of the drizzling rain.

"Thanks," I said, lifting to kiss him, and then stopped, thinking better of it.

"Why don't I get a kiss?"

"'Cause I don't wanna make you sick."

"Warder," he said, having gone back to calling me by the name when we were alone. It turned out that he liked calling me that, more of an endearment than anything else. It didn't matter to me; it was the tone of his voice, soft, sultry, that flushed me with heat. His voice made me think of sex every single time. The dark-haired, dark-eyed man turned me inside out.

"Warder," he repeated.

"Sorry."

"I told you before, I don't get your stupid human diseases," he told me, bending to capture my mouth.

I whimpered, and he smiled as he claimed my mouth.

It started slow and gentle and quickly became teeth and tongue and hands under clothes.

"Fuck," he growled, shoving me off him. "I gotta get you home."

I waggled my eyebrows at him.

"No, idiot," he snapped at me, "your skin is burning up."

"'Cause of you." I leered at him.

He was scowling. "No, not because of me, because you have a fever, dumbass. Which one is his goddamn apartment, so I can check and we can go home."

Home.

He was coming home with me.

Home to bed. Home in bed. Home where he lived with me.

"I wanna go home with you," I said, my vision clearing with that shiny clarity you get when your fever spikes way up, right before delirium. "I want you to live with me and stay with me because I love you so much it hurts."

His gorgeous, smoky, topaz eyes lit up like I had never seen. "You love me?"

"Yeah, kind of a lot. Really, really a lot."

He sucked in his breath and grabbed me and crushed me to the wall of hard muscle that was his chest and squeezed the air right out of my lungs.

I managed to get loose enough to free my arms so I could hug him back and sigh long and loud.

The man was ferocious and dangerous and untamed and just... perfect for me. I was head-over-heels crazy about him, and from the way he was when we went out, guarding me like I was made of gold, snarling at anyone who got too close, I understood that he was just as nuts about me. And now he was getting ready to nurse me through whatever I was about to get and seemed damn happy about it.

"I love you back, warder, more than you know, more than you can imagine."

But I had a good idea.

He shoved me off him, glaring at me. "Which fucking apartment?"

I chuckled and told him. And I was going to make him promise to keep out of sight, but before I could get the words out, he was gone, having bolted down the street, charging through the rain. I watched him leap up from the ground to the second floor and higher until he landed on a balcony and climbed over the railing. It was too hard to see what happened next, too dark, the rain a distracting drizzle around me. Leaning back, I shivered in the cold, having done myself a disservice by not wrapping up in more layers. I inhaled the scarf around my neck and realized that what I was smelling was me. The man smelled like me, like our home, like our bed, like us. I tipped my head back so I didn't cry.

I would never have another hearth, because he couldn't be that.

He would be more, because we were equals.

In minutes he was back, and he took hold of my jacket and pulled me off the wall where I had been leaning.

"God, you're burning up." He was worried and put his arm around me to lead me down the street toward the next one where the cabs ran.

"So what?" I asked him.

"He's not possessed."

And I hadn't really entertained the thought. I had been checking more for Rene's benefit than mine. "I didn't think he was."

"He is, however, entertaining more than one man in his apartment right now."

"Oh." I nodded, grinning. "Well, there ya go. I'll report back to Rene that all is well and Frank's just having fun, and after awhile I'm sure he'll settle down with just one—"

"Or two."

"Or two guys." I smiled. "I guess he'll need a bigger house than he thought he would."

"For the dungeon," Raphael teased me.

I laughed at him. "Maybe I should call Rene tonight so—"

He cleared his throat. "I will speak to Rene. You're done."

"Whatever you say."

"Really, whatever I say," he said, pressing a palm to my forehead. "You're hot."

"Am I?" I smiled at him, leaning in, kissing under his jaw. "You wanna take me home and get in bed with me?"

"Oh that's the plan, though not how you're thinking." He chuckled, tucking me close to him as we walked.

"Just so long as you come home with me, I don't care what we do."

"I don't care either."

"Promise you'll always come home."

"You won't be able to keep me away."

And his fierce promise was all I needed.

About the Author

MARY CALMES currently lives in Honolulu, Hawaii, with her husband and two children and hopes to eventually move off the rock to a place where her children can experience fall and even winter. She graduated from the University of the Pacific (ironic) in Stockton, California, with a bachelor's degree in English literature. Due to the fact that it is English lit and not English grammar, do not ask her to point out a clause for you, as it will so not happen. She loves writing, becoming immersed in the process, and falling into the work.

She can even tell you what her characters smell like. She works at a copy store but has been unable to incorporate that into a book... yet. She also buys way too many books on Amazon.